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Published November 26th, 2008

Winegrowing with Friends

By Andrea A. Firth



Suzanne Doherty checks out the grapes at the family vineyard in Lafayette Photo Andrea A. Firth

For Suzanne and CJ Doherty of Lafayette winegrowing is about spending time with friends—at least that's how it started. CJ, who grew up in Richmond, got involved in growing grapes and making wine through a high school friend who had planted a vineyard in his Walnut Creek backyard. "It wasn't for the love of grapes," explains Suzanne. "CJ just wanted to hang out with his friends."

Once CJ's pal had maxed out the number of vines he could fit on his property, the two turned their sights to CJ's backyard, a large, flat area that used to be a mustard field. In 2000, CJ and his buddies planted 100 cabernet vines, and the Dohertys were officially winegrowers. "Some of that early wine was so bad," states Suzanne shaking her head.

A few years ago, CJ's high school friend moved to Healdsburg to pursue his passion for winegrowing more seriously. CJ's interest in the vineyard waned and his time became further occupied by the demands of work. Suzanne recalls looking out over the vines in her backyard in a panic. "I felt like I was pregnant with a ton of grapes, and my boyfriend had left me," she says with a smile.

Not the quitting type, Suzanne dug in and learned what she could about managing the vines and making wine while working and caring for their family. Initially, the Dohertys attempted to make their own wine, but Suzanne admits that her grape jam tasted better than the wine did the first year. She recalls giving their insurance agent, a knowledgeable wine drinker, a bottle of their homegrown wine as a gift. "He was honest and told us it was undrinkable," she reports with a

laugh.

Suzanne knew they needed an alternative plan for managing the vineyard. Through a chance meeting, she connected with Dave Parker (of Parkmon Vineyards) who now manages their vineyard and makes the wine. Parker felt the Dohertys had a good grape crop and the two forged a partnership. "I am thrilled that Dave takes the grapes," she states. Although the vines produced a disappointing yield this year due to the early heat of the summer and some pesky critters who were snacking on the grapes, Suzanne remains committed to her crop.

"If you have the time and the patience, they are really amazing plants," says Suzanne whose affection for the vineyard has grown now that she is no longer responsible for the day to day management. "Because we are located on the trail, lots of people stop to look at the grapevines. CJ likes to talk with the passersby. It's a fabulous, fun place to live."

Reach the reporter at: andrea@lamorindaweekly.com

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