

Published January 27, 2016

Deer Hill Winery Takes Over Owner's Basement

By A.K. Carroll



Photos courtesy Bill Scanlin

in the alcoves and racks of bottles alongside one wall, Scanlin insists that it isn't a designated wine room.

"It's not a public tasting room," he clarified. "I have to get to know somebody before I have them over." Some of this is on account of city regulations and some of it is simply fitting to the level of Scanlin's winemaking, which is currently something between a hobby and a business.

Scanlin planted his vines shortly after moving into his current home in 1998. When a friend of Scanlin's visited his new property for the first time, he remarked that it would be ideal for growing grapes. "I thought 'what the heck?' It sounds like fun," said Scanlin. "Then you start to get into it."

Scanlin primarily grows cabernet sauvignon, with 600 vines covering roughly three quarters of his 1.5 acres. He also plants patches of cab franc and merlot, which he uses for blending his 95-percent cab. Scanlin's wine is "field-blended," which means that he does little to manipulate it once it has been crushed and fermented. "It is what it is," said Scanlin. And it is pretty good for an in-home production.

But like any hobby, Scanlin started out slowly and had to learn from his mistakes. He began making wine with a few friends just for fun, and eventually his own vineyard started producing fruit. "I had my mistakes," said Scanlin. "I lost a few years for different reasons. I remember pumping a couple hundred gallons of it down the drain."

There were also the infamous Lamorinda deer to contend with. "I had a lot problems in the beginning with deer breaking in and ruining the crop," said Scanlin. "So I didn't get a crop for maybe four years." Despite this fact, Scanlin's label bears an emblem of the animal. "I finally conquered them," he said.

Scanlin is a member of the Lamorinda Wine Growers Association, a group of 90-100 grape growers that formed in 2005. Only a handful have bonded wineries, including Scanlin. "It kind of legitimizes the hobby," he remarked. "I just thought it would be a good thing to do."

Sometimes a little hobby turns into a big one, expanding its influence as it takes over your free time, your resources and even your home. This has been the experience of Lafayette resident and owner of Deer Hill Wines, Bill Scanlin, whose backyard vineyard turned into a project that turned into a business that is taking over his home.

"We wanted a place (where) we could entertain," Scanlin said of the hosting room that he recently added to the ground level of his house. The room was six months in the making, which seems relatively quick when you consider the final result. The room is rustic and dimly lit with marble counters, beige stone walls and large arched doorways.

Though the wet bar is stocked with sparkling glass goblets and there are murals of vineyards painted

The association is currently pushing for Lamorinda to gain approval as its own American Viticultural Area (AVA). Right now they are recognized as a part of the San Francisco Bay Area, but that doesn't account for Lamorinda's unique terroir and climate, which Scanlin compares to Napa, with cool nights and warm days. The AVA approval, which should go through by April 1, is exciting for a winemaker like Scanlin. "We get to say there's something special about Lamorinda - the soil, the weather - there's something special about the wine in this area."

Like most hobbies, winemaking is one that Scanlin has scaled up to slowly, but surely. "I've gone to classes. I've talked to people. I've done a lot of reading," said Scanlin. He gets help with some of the physical labor, but calls all of the shots on the overall process. Scanlin describes his wine as drinkable and hearty. "I really like full-bodied, rich wines," he said. "I try to make my wines have that characteristic." He and his wine have made appearances at the Lafayette wine show, the Orinda Trivia Bee and other local events.

"I haven't pushed it yet," said Scanlin. "I still need to go out and get this put into stores and in restaurants around here." Deer Hill Wines isn't his priority right now, but like the vines in his yard and the number of bottles on his wine rack, the hobby is growing on him.

"If I can produce wine that can command a high price, that'd be great," said Scanlin, who considers wine as a potential retirement business. "I'd like to make and be known for having a really good boutique wine that everyone's after. But I'm not that widely known yet."

Scanlin's dreams for Deer Hill Wines are much like his dreams for the new space in his home, where he envisions winemakers' dinners, corporate business meetings, and social gatherings in the future. "I think a lot of possibilities can happen."

Lamorinda Weekly business articles are intended to inform the community about local business activities, not to endorse a particular company, product or service.



Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA