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Lamorinda produced wines - a labor of love

By Vera Kochan



A view of Magalhaes Vineyards, which overlooks Moraga Shopping Center. Photos provided

With the holidays in full swing, good food and good cheer go hand in hand. When thinking about wine, usually the Napa or Sonoma valleys come to mind, but with a microclimate that is perfect for wine production the Lamorinda area is coming into its own.

Of the approximately 70 winegrowers and producers involved with the Lamorinda Winegrowers Association, most have careers outside of the industry. Realizing the potential to turn a backyard into a vineyard, a hobby became a labor of love.

One such vintner is Moraga resident and LWGA co-founder Joao Magalhaes. Formerly a civil engineer with Bechtel Engineering Company, he never intended to grow grapes when he built his home high on a hill overlooking the Moraga Shopping Center in 2004. Having a backyard that sloped was a challenge. After exchanging notes on home construction and wine production with Dave Parker, a fellow vintner, he decided that grape growing was a good idea.

"I contacted the Town of Moraga to see if it was okay to plant a vineyard," Magalhaes said. "It would be good for fire prevention. Some roots go 10-feet deep and that's good for land stabilization."

Wanting to do things right the first time, he consulted with Brother Timothy Diener of Saint Mary's College who was a pioneer in the California wine industry and a cellar master for Christian Brothers Winery. At the same time, Magalhaes and Parker formed the LWGA, borrowing the bylaws from the Livermore Winegrowers Association. Their first meeting in 2005 included a membership of wine lovers, growers and producers.

Using a vineyard manager that handles all of the actual growth process, Magalhaes and his wife, Monica, currently produce Pinot Noir, Sirah and Merlot bearing his Villa Calacola label. "I don't sell my wine," he stated, "I give it to friends, family and charity."

LWGA President Bill Scanlin of Lafayette is the owner and winemaker of Deer Hill Vineyards. He began his business in 1998 when a friend, who had a vineyard, talked him into it, stating that his hillside was perfect for grape growing.

"I bought grapes from Napa and started making wine before the crops came in between 1999-2000," Scanlin noted. "It took about five years to get them going, and I went commercial in 2010." He currently produces Cabernet Sauvignon, Sangiovese and Chardonnay with Zinfandel on the horizon.

Explaining how he chose his label, Scanlin said, "I tried to find a name that I could trademark and since I live off Deer Hill Road, it was easy." He built his tasting room in 2015, and offers wine tasting by appointment. His wines are also available in Diablo Foods and Total Wine & More. His website is deerhillvineyards.com.

Moraga resident and LWGA Vice President Carol Haag, whose label is Rheem Valley Vineyard, said she "got talked into planting grapes in the yard from Joao Magalhaes." She's been doing it since 2009 using family, friends and a picking staff to help with the harvest.

When asked what was a good year for her grapes, she recalled, "I think 2012 was the best year, and I'm looking forward to 2019. A bad year was 2015 because of drought, animals and birds eating the grapes and just the temperature fluctuation in general." She is in the process of getting a website up and running.

Orinda's Bill English has been producing wine on and off since 1976. His winery, Meadow View, uses grapes from growers Doug Spear and Isabelle Ord among others, to make his Chardonnays, Cabernets and Super T (from the Tuscan region of Italy - a blend of 85% Sangiovese, 7.5% Cabernet Franc and 7.5% Cabernet Sauvignon).

Growing up in Ohio, English didn't know much about wines until moving to California after college. "My friends and I went on trips to the wine country a lot, and I decided that I liked wine. I also like to make things, so what do I want to do about that?"

English has been in the wine business for 18 years advancing from amateur status to commercial in 2014, with a focus on making wine from Lamorinda grapes. With a degree in chemical engineering and a career

working for Chevron, he recalls, "I worked as a guy who buys and sells oil." Rather than move out of state for the job, he decided to become an oil industry consultant, but after retiring from the field he decided to devote himself full time to wines. For more information visit www.MeadowViewWinery.net.

Larry Thal of Thal Vineyards LLC is currently in talks with Lafayette's planning commission to take over the space vacated by Napa Auto Parts and turn it into a Lamorinda wine tasting and sales venue. His website is www.thalvineyards.com.

The Lamorinda Winegrowers Association hosts regular meetings and offers insights into the aspects of winegrowing. To find information about an upcoming meeting, visit lamorindawinegrowers.com.



Rheem Valley Vineyard Photos provided

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