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Updated: Thursday, August 06, 2009

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A vineyard of dreams



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By Karlena Franz / Community Correspondent

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Wine maker Ray Krause has a short commute.

He can rise in the morning, take a few steps outside his house and be at work at Westbrook Wine Farms, the business he and his wife Tammy started in 1995.

"Waking up every morning and walking 50 feet, really is a chore," Krause said with a smile.

He is a man who obviously loves his work.

"Here we are happy in a small winery that my wife Tammy and I can take care of all by ourselves," Krause said. "It is truly hands-on, that is the way we like it so if something goes right we like it and if it goes wrong we have no one to blame."

Krause, who studied in the Fresno State enology program in the 1960s, launched their vineyard on 40 acres of land in the Sierra foothills near Oakhurst.

"We have domesticated five acres, and our other 35 acres is what we call our carbon offset because it is cattle grazing and animal habitat," Krause said.

Krause said after a few years of land preparation, their first wine was produced in 1999 at Fresno State. It wasn't until 2001 that the couple made their first wine at Westbrook Wine Farm.

The Westbrook Wine Farm is known for Fait Accompli, a wine made in the red Bordeaux style.

Krause, who sits on the board of the Yosemite Sierra Visitors Bureau, said six varieties of red Bordeaux grapes, when mixed together, create Fait Accompli.

The winery produces about 200 cases of Fait Accompli yearly, along with 1,700 cases of other varieties. Krause said he acquires grapes from other professional wineries in the Valley for some of the other wines.

At an elevation of 1,550 feet, his farm is perfect for growing grapes, Krause said. "We get more sun days than Fresno or Madera and no fog, which

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Ray Krause

The 40-acre Westbrook Wine Farm has a loyal following of customers who like the atmosphere of a small winery and don't have to go to Napa Valley to enjoy great wine.



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Quervo MARGARITA

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during winter helps the buds get more sunlight," Krause said.

Krause said the grapevines are grafted on a drought-resistant root. The result is that the vines require less water. "Other types of methods used for farming take 100 times more water," Krause said. "By giving the vines less water we achieve a better color, greater flavors and characteristics in the wine."

The highlight of every year is harvest time in September. "That's the fun part," Krause said. "It's Tammy and I against Mother Nature."

Customers who have bought wine in the last 12 months receive an invitation to the winery on a Sunday for harvesting. The first 75 to respond to the invite are accepted.

Krause said the grapes are hand-manicured before going into the tubs. "When the harvest is complete we have Erna's Elderberry House cater a very nice vineyard lunch and we have a bluegrass or rock n' roll band play and by 3 o'clock everybody goes home," Krause said.

Westbrook Wine Farm is not open to the general public. Wine tasters have to make an appointment by phone or email or by invitation.

Three times a year, Westbrook participates in the Madera Wine Trail, also by appointment or reservation. "We need to know how many people to expect because we can put about 10 people an hour in, which is about 50 people per day whereas bigger wineries can have 500 to 800 people," Krause said.

"We have a very loyal following of customers. We call them the Westbrook Wine Perps, which stands for perpetrators, and they perpetuate our brand and our existence," Krause said with a smile.

The wine is sold at the farm and Sierra Nut House locations. A few select restaurants also serve the wine.

Customer Ed Lynch came across an article a few years ago about Westbrook Wine Farm and was intrigued. "I went up, bought some wine and the rest is history," Lynch said.

Lynch said the winery is much smaller and more personable than larger wineries. "He (Krause) talks to you about his philosophy on wine and takes the time to talk and get to know individuals," Lynch said. "Next to the wine, that personal touch is the best thing."

Lynch said he tries to support local wineries. "You don't have to go to Napa to enjoy great wine," Lynch said.

Kenneth Fugelsang, winemaster at Fresno State University, said he has known Krause for a long time through the university.

"I think Ray's wines are fabulous and there is very good evidence of it," Fugelsang said. "They have received awards so it is not just my opinion. It is the judges at these competitions as well."

Fugelsang said the winery is beautiful and all of the Krauses hard effort shows. "Ray has years of experience that shine through," Fugelsang said. "I am very impressed with his skills of blending and bringing his wines out to market."



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