

Harvest Wine Festival gives revelers a taste of fall

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There's nothing that says autumn quite like the combination of wine and high-powered rifles, so for its first Harvest Wine Festival, Saratoga's Mountain Winery decided to try an unusual blend Saturday: high-caliber Chardonnays and gun-wielding toddlers. The result was a day that celebrated the bounteous beauty and fecundity of the local landscape, with no report of serious injuries.

Trent Keene of Willow Glen, age 4, fired a barrage of wine corks from a muzzle-loaded air gun as his father, Aaron, watched from a safe distance. "As long as it's not bullets," Trent's dad said, beaming. "What could be more fun to do with a cork?"

His seemed to be a minority opinion. Most of the people who climbed the winery's serpentine road to a breathtaking 1,200-foot peak came to fill a bottomless tasting glass for the benefit of the Mountain Winery Kids' Foundation. Even before Saturday's fall festival, attended by several hundred people, the foundation had raised more than \$500,000 for local children's charities.

The cork-shooting target range was free, and the guns were hooked to compressed air tanks, so they were always ready for a little syrah sniping. An abundance of wine, or in some cases youthful exuberance, led to several corks being blasted at a vintage Paul Masson barrel behind the targets. The legendary "Champagne King of California" built the winery, and a beautiful château, at the summit of more than 500 acres of vineyards.

After Aaron Keene had finished watching his boy pump hot cork, he proceeded to the nearby Grape Stomp. There, he became the first adult male to stick so much as a toe into the wooden barrels where women and children had been baring their soles all day. Sue Woods — whose family just moved to Saratoga from England — called out to her 10-year-old daughter, Isabelle, who was up to her ankles in cabernet grapes. "Just think," her mom cried, "in a few years you might be drinking that. Château LaFeet!"

With her reddish hair covered by a scarf, Isabelle bore an uncanny resemblance to Lucy Ricardo in the legendary grape-stomping episode of "I Love Lucy" from 1956. That scene, in which Lucille Ball got into a wrestling match with a tiny Italian woman in a large grape vat, created an indelible impression of what grape-stomping looks like.

"Ever since I saw that 'I Love Lucy,' I thought, 'Oh my God, I want to do that!'" said Kristina Schmidt of Los Gatos, who bounced up and down in juice that winemakers call the "must" wearing a grape-colored dress. "I could definitely see taking a bath in this," she said.

Nobody did, but it wouldn't have been a bad idea, according to grape stomp supervisor Debbie Moessinger. "It makes your skin really soft," she said, loud enough so that women passing by could hear her. Every time somebody asked why grapes crushed by bare feet didn't make the wine yucky, Moessinger explained that the chemistry of grapes makes them a natural antiseptic and antioxidant. "It kills all the germs," she said.

Not that even handmade wines come near the feet anymore. "Trust me, when the machines came around, nobody was stomping grapes," said Jesse "The Mayor" Montenegro, the company's wine manager. "It's very old world."

The stomped grapes were not going into the winery's fall harvest, but that didn't stop Moessinger from washing the feet of all the romper room stompers before they tiptoed through the Cabernets. When they emerged from the barrels with purple feet, she had towels and a stack of Baby Wipes ready. Moessinger washed their feet like they were New Testament disciples.

Mountain tsunamis

As her 5-year-old daughter, Kathrine pounded around in the purple goo, Svetlana Sadekova of Mountain View exclaimed with more enthusiasm than accuracy, "We want wine made from your grapes!" Kathrine and her friend Samantha Phillips, also 5, stood motionless for a moment in adjoining barrels, trying to figure out what was expected of them. Then their parents formed a semicircle and began shouting, "Squish! Squish! Squish!"

"We were in Sonoma last weekend, and they talked a lot about crushing the grapes," said Melissa Phillips, Samantha's mom, "but they weren't letting people actually do it."

Right. That's Sonoma for you. They probably didn't even have cork-spewing weaponry outside the tasting rooms.

The festival also featured three artists, who worked at their easels as people walked by with food and wine. While one drew caricatures of the customers at \$10 a pop, Jen Raynes stood before a huge, nearly empty canvas and stared out at the sweeping panorama of Santa Clara Valley below her. However, she was painting a curling ocean wave. A dozen "Tiny Tsunamis," finger-painted in acrylic by Raynes, were available for sale nearby.

"When I realized I was going to be coming here," she said, "I was desperately trying to paint a landscape. But I just couldn't do it. I can't paint a straight line. I think everything I do has a curve in it."

When the winery was still producing for the Masson label, its slogan — famously delivered in a 1970s TV commercial by Orson Welles — was, "We will sell no wine before its time." But by Saturday evening, the grapes had all been stomped, the corks had all been popped and a full harvest moon hung over the mountaintop.

It was time.

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