

11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
WTBS	WGN	WTV	WTV	WTV	WTV	WTV	WTV	WTV	WTV	WTV
USA	CRN	CRN	CRN	CRN	CRN	CRN	CRN	CRN	CRN	CRN



Paul and Merrill Bonarrigo own and operate Messina Hof

Bonarrigos' love is their wine

By MARY COX

Staff Writer

Hundreds of wines line the shelf at the grocery store, each competing to fill the glass of every shopper. The competition among the big producers like Gallo, that produces roughly 300 million gallons a year, is tough. But, Paul Bonarrigo, a local winemaker, refuses to take part in this competition. Paul and his wife, Merrill, own the Messina Hof Winery, two miles east of Bryan, and their philosophy emphasizes quality, not mass production.

"Our business grew out of a love of wine," Paul said. "We never intended to be corporate America or conglomerate."

Although the demand for the Bonarrigo's wines offers a shot at a larger market, they choose to remain small.

"There's advantages to being small," Merrill said as she sipped her Messina Hof Vino Di Amore — the wine of love.

"Paul does weekly tastings, which means quality is easier to control," she said. "This way he knows what's going on all the time."

And what's going on at Messina Hof is good vino. Business has tripled for the Bonarrigo's since last year. They expect to produce 25,000 gallons this year, and compared to the 5,800 gallons they produced in 1983, it makes the winemaking in-

dustry look like the perfect career opportunity for a wine-loving journalist. But as with most everything else, it looks a lot easier than it is. And patience is a virtue.

Paul said it's necessary to wait between three to five years to develop a good root system once you plant a grapevine. Paul has an interesting way of taking care of his grapevines. It's a century-old French custom called companion planting. He plants rosebushes at the end of each row of vines to indicate fungus. If the humidity and air temperature gets too high, a fungus will form on the rosebush, and this tells Paul when to spray his grapevines.

After the years tick by, and the roots grow strong, the grapes can be harvested for wine. Paul and Merrill said the harvest is an exciting time.

"The harvest begins sometime near July 4, depending on the type of spring we have," Merrill said. "If it's a late spring, we have a late harvest."

After picking the berries, the stems are separated from them, and the berries are squeezed in a press to produce a syrup-like juice. (All their equipment is from Italy.) Fermentation converts the sugar in the berries to alcohol. Different styles of wine are determined by how long they are fermented.

"For a sweeter wine, you stop the fermenting," Paul said.

The Bonarrigo's harvest their grapes earlier than most vinyards.

"Usually we're the earliest place to harvest in the country," Merrill said. "That gives us an advantage in the market because we can have our white wines on the shelf for Christmas, which is difficult for California."

The Bonarrigo's sell their wines to some local restaurants and merchants, but Messina Hof wine is not limited to this area. People as far away as England will enjoy Paul and Merrill's efforts this year because they expect to export about 50 cases of wine this year.

Paul and Merrill attend many wine shows and competitions, but most of their reputation has been built by word of mouth. Because Merrill is a former Aggie (class of '75) and Paul received an honorary degree from A&M after completing some graduate courses, the old Ag network provided lots of publicity. During football season, the couple said former students visit the picnic grounds and the winery at Messina Hof. Often, former students are so taken by the wines, they get wholesalers in their area to carry the Bonarrigo's wines.

The key to Paul and Merrill's success can be traced back as far as the 1800s.

"My family's had a winery in Italy since the 1800s," Paul said.

"The tradition is passed down to the first born son of each generation."

The name Paul is also passed down to the first born son of each generation, so it's no surprise that Paul and Merrill's three-year-old son is also named Paul. "Paulie," as his dad calls him, can even rattle off the names of some of the 11 varieties of wine from the 30 acres of the Messina Hof vineyards. Their son is a reflection of both parents, with big brown eyes from Dad and fair skin and blond hair from Mom.

The name Messina Hof is also a reflection of Paul and Merrill. Messina, Italy, is where the Bonarrigo family is from, and Hof, Germany, is where Merrill's ancestors lived. The blend of these two people with these two backgrounds make up a very classy couple. This class spills over into their business and their home that they built themselves.

Merrill was a real estate agent in Bryan in the 1970's when Paul came here to open the physical therapy department at St. Joseph Hospital. Merrill met Paul when he was in the market for a house, but she laughed when she said that she didn't sell Paul a house until after they were married.

They began planting their vineyard in 1977, but only made wine for their personal consumption. In 1981, they produced a mere 50 gallons of wine and won the Best Amateur Wine Award of that year. But in 1983, they were bonded by the government, which enabled the couple to sell their wine to the public.

Paul said they've come a long way since then, and they've got the awards to prove it. Messina Hof has won 11 medals since September. The Bonarrigo's are very modest about these accomplishments, but they have the self-assurance of people who are proud of what they do.

Recently, Paul and Merrill bought the old Villa Maria Ursuline Academy, a private girl's school. This 7,000 sq. foot structure was dismantled to move to Messina Hof, and Paul hopes this winery addition will be completed by 1986.

"Our next project is to get the winery completed and get it done the way we want," Paul said. And after that's done, the future holds many more plans.

"I think in five to ten years, we'll have a tourist region here with a hotel near the winery," he said. "There'll be a center for fine wines and fine cooking. We could sell out in Houston alone, but we want to parcel our wine out in different places to gain a statewide reputation. If someone has a compliment or criticism, here we are. That's why we have our name on the label — we're not hiding behind the label."

AT EASE

Dear Winos,

Texas wines aren't just of the Mad Dog 20/20 variety. No, they are produced on 14 wineries from Lubbock to Del Rio and are ranked 14th in the nation in overall production. These are prize-winning bottles of vino.

We became aware of those facts a couple of weeks ago when the Messina Hoff Winery, operated by Paul and Merrill Bonarrigo, sent out an invitation for the press (that's us) to attend its Spring Gala. The Gala promised wine tasting, a horse show, entertainment and a pie contest. The clincher was the request for one of us to be a pie judge. Who could turn down such an opportunity — free pie, free wine and all before noon!

Shawn volunteered for the pie job and the rum cream took the cake. A nice day was had by all, except when we lost Bill for a little while — like all photographers he could not resist the wildflowers down the road. And we learned about the genuine hospitality of the local winemakers. They invited us into their world and made us feel welcome.

But the industry goes much farther than our backyard, although it's very impressive that it's even in our backyard. Cathy Riely, armed with research books and some other sources, has uncorked the history of Texas wine. It goes back a long way and everyone knows that the older the bottle, the better the wine.

Mary Cox spent an evening back out at Messina Hoff with the Bonarrigos. Refreshed with none other than their specialty, Vino Amore, they talked about the roots of the Bonarrigo family and the roots of their grapevines. It's an intricate process and patience is the key.

We had a tasty time with this issue. So next time you choose wine — not only go domestic, go Texan.

Cheers!

Shawn & Leigh-ellen

Shawn Behlen & Leigh-Ellen Clark
Co-editors