

# Wining and Dining Messina Hof style

By MANDY CATER  
THE BATTALION

**M**essina Hof Wine Cellars stands as an oasis, hidden among the sandy back roads of Bryan. In an area deeply rooted in tradition, owners Paul and Merrill Bonarrigo have spread some roots of their own.

Nestled among rolling hills and reflective lakes, Messina Hof's vineyards have been a Texas tradition since 1977.

For the Bonarrigos, the winery is a reflection of an important triad: romance, family and heritage.

The winery's name is a symbol of this unity. Paul's ancestral roots reach back to Messina, Sicily, and Merrill's family tree can be traced to Hof, Germany.

Wine-making has a 200-year history in the Bonarrigo family. Each generation, the first-born male takes the name Paul, and is passed the torch as the wine-maker of the next era.

Paul Bonarrigo had this responsibility in mind when he studied wine at the University of California at Davis. He moved to Texas in 1976 to open a physical therapy department at St. Joseph's Hospital in Bryan, where a patient planted the first seeds of inspiration for Messina Hof.

The patient, a Texas A&M graduate student, was writing his thesis on the feasibility of grape-growing in the Brazos Valley. His research concluded that conditions in this area were ideal for a vineyard. So, with the family secrets and the new research in hand, the Bonarrigos decided to give wine-making a shot.

The result was an experimental one-acre vineyard.

"It was a hobby at first," Merrill Bonarrigo said. "We thought it would be exciting to be pioneers." Today, Messina Hof is at the forefront of

Texas wine-making. In 1983, the first year of commercial production, the Bryan vineyard yielded 1,300 gallons of wine. Today the Bonarrigo vineyards number 17, and Messina Hof is expected to produce 112,500 gallons of wine.

The Bonarrigo's son, Paul Mitchell Bonarrigo, the next generation's wine-maker, sees the family business as a great opportunity. He is already learning the skills he will need to take the reins in the future.

Hof will take to the skies as a beverage choice for American Airlines' first class customers.

Even with all this praise and exposure, the Bonarrigos have their feet firmly planted in the soil. The Bonarrigos take an active role in the winery and visitors' enjoyment. Merrill Bonarrigo said the main goal of Messina Hof is to make wine approachable to everyone.

"Wine is generally an intimidating product," she said. "We want to make it a staple at every table. We try our best to make it user-friendly."

This year marks Messina Hof's 20th anniversary. Over the years, the Bonarrigos have developed numerous ways to make their visitors and customers feel like close family friends.

The winery's guest center is a cozy historical estate, once home to a U.S. Ambassador to Uruguay. The second floor has been transformed into a romantic bed and breakfast hideaway, Vintner's Loft, complete with family photos and antiques. The laid-back atmosphere is made complete with lazy lakeside hammocks and patio tables blanketed by umbrellas.

Under Merrill Bonarrigo's leadership, Designer Events also offers wedding and banquet planning on site. They also host free tours, murder mystery dinners, Run through the Vines and Harvest Weekends.

Last Saturday kicked-off this year's harvest, an event Paul Bonarrigo said is a combination of *A Walk in the Clouds* and "I Love Lucy."

Guests take to the vines, cutting off grape clusters and tossing them into plastic yellow crates. After the harvesting is finished, guests jump into crates filled with fresh grapes and stomp, juice flying everywhere. Paul leads a chorus of "inspirational stomping music." And participants' escapades are hallmarked by a grape juice footprint on the back of a souvenir Messina Hof T-shirt.

Please see WINE on Page 4.



PHOTOGRAPH: Brad Graeber

Amy Domenick participates in grape stomping at Messina Hof.

**“It was a hobby at first. We thought it would be exciting to be pioneers.”**

Merrill Bonarrigo  
Co-owner of Messina Hof winery

"You never learn the business, not really," Paul Mitchell Bonarrigo said. "I just hope I'll improve it."

Mitchell will have some pretty big shoes to fill, as accolades for Messina Hof pour in continuously.

According to *The Wall Street Journal*, "Texas is the fastest growing wine-producing region in the country ... and the leader is Messina Hof Wine Cellars in Bryan, Texas."

Messina Hof has won dozens of awards, quickly becoming the most honored winery in Texas. The wines have even made their way to Hollywood. In *The Evening Star*, the recently released sequel to *Terms of Endearment*, Messina Hof wines shared scenes with Jack Nicholson and Shirley MacLaine.

Messina Hof wine is currently served in the sky boxes of Texas Stadium. And soon, Messina

## UFOFU lands in Aggieland to play with local favorites

By APRIL TOWER  
THE BATTALION

Leave it to Willie Bennett and Chris Penn to do something different for the music scene of Bryan-College Station. Bennett, the talent scout for Dixie Theatre and 3rd Floor Cantina, and Penn, manager of Marooned Records, have joined forces and are set to host the Marooned Summer Jam tonight at Dixie Theatre at 9 p.m. This is the first four-band show at Dixie Theatre.

Bands scheduled to play are Denton's UFOFU; Boulder, Colo.'s House of Large Sizes; and local bands Kid Fantastic and Lewis.

"In my opinion, those are the best bands in town," Penn said of Kid Fantastic and Lewis. "They've

got the best followings right now."

Nathan McKown, bassist for Kid Fantastic, said he is excited about the band's first local show since the release of its debut album, *Closer To the End*.

"It'll be revamped a little bit to take up the slack for Jason (Schleter, guitarist, who is in Dallas for the summer)," McKown said. "The bass is distorted — it's not usually."

Kid Fantastic will play a few songs from the album, but McKown said the set is mostly comprised of new songs.

Kid Fantastic will also be playing a "pre-performance" show at Marooned Records at 3 p.m. to promote *Closer To the End*, which is No. 2 in sales at Musicland.

Lewis singer and guitarist

Matt Beaton said the band members intend to play at least one new song, and plenty from the band's early years.

"It's gonna be a good chance to get together and work on new stuff," Beaton said.

The show will also be an opportunity to promote the local music scene.

UFOFU is sure to put on an interesting show. The band, who made its break opening shows for Tripping Daisy, is known for its young drummer, Ben Curtis, who began playing in the band at age 15. The band has also been recognized for the unabashed between-songs monologues of lead singer and guitarist Joe Butcher, who has been known to declare onstage his heroine addiction

and homosexuality.

UFOFU has been touring with House of Large Sizes, and is making a practice stop for the show tonight.

The show will be a chance for out-of-towners and locals to experience the flavor of a Bryan-College Station rock 'n' roll show.

"We're gonna try to do it old school, with everyone out there getting excited and having a good time just like it used to be," Beaton said. "I want everyone out there supporting the local music scene — I've kinda noticed it slipping lately."

Tim Austin, Kid Fantastic singer and guitarist, said the audience has a lot to look forward to.

"They can expect an exotic trip through an unexplored realm of raw passion," he said. "It's gonna be great."



UFOFU

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All students, faculty and staff are invited to attend a public meeting to hear a briefing on the recent legislative action that designates the General Use Fee (GUF) as Tuition (this briefing relates to the GUF increase approved in January 1997)

Friday, August 1, 1997

9:00 a.m. - 10:30 a.m.

Memorial Student Center, Room 292

Office of the President, Texas A&M University