

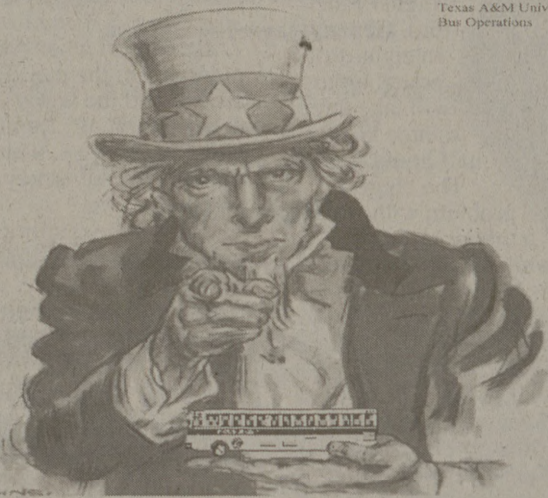
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Wine, Texas style

Messina Hof presents new wines, offers touch of atmosphere, class

By HILLARY GANT
The Battalion

Messina Hof winery was founded in Bryan, by Paul and Merrill Borragino in 1977, but the award-winning winemakers get their inspiration from 200 years of family tradition that reaches all the way to Sicily and Germany.

The Messina Hof winery celebrated its new vintages this weekend with a two-day festival that included wine tasting, grape stomping, educational seminars and two gourmet dinner receptions with live entertainment and dancing.

Messina Hof started as a joint venture with Texas A&M to try to find an appropriate grape variety for producing wine in Texas. Messina Hof is one of 13 vineyards A&M has helped found over the years with its agriculture and agribusiness programs.

The Bonarrigos joined A&M in finding a grape that was hardy in the Texas climate, Paul Bonarrigo said they planted 47 grape varieties on the 40-acre test site to test the viability of the grape plants.

Bonarrigo said 42 acres of Messina Hof's vineyards are planted with one variety of grape vines called the black, or linoir, grape. The winery collects grapes from other locations throughout Texas to make its Texas-bred vintages. The linoir grapevine does so well in Texas' extreme weather that it does not have to be grafted onto harder stock plants to produce great-tasting fruit.

"It loves the soil and the heat and humidity here," Bonarrigo said.

Bonarrigo said the linoir grape has a specific taste that makes it especially good for winemaking.

"It tastes like those chocolate-covered cherries," Bonarrigo said.

Messina Hof's name also has a history. Bonarrigo's family is from Messina, Sicily, and his wife Merrill's family is from Hof, Germany.

Paul Bonarrigo studied winemaking in college and he said he has memories of making wine in his parents' house. He said his aunts and uncles would come over on Saturdays to make wine in the basement.

"It was great fun for me as a kid," Bonarrigo said.

At Messina Hof, the grapes are harvested by hand in July and August. The grapes are pressed, and the stems are removed. Bonarrigo said the grape skins are removed for white wines and left on for red and blush wines. In Messina Hof's port wine lab, the grapes and juice are put into 4,000-gallon refrigerated fermenting containers to turn the fruit into alcohol. Then the liquid is put into oak barrels from six months to two years, depending on the variety. Bonarrigo said the barrels give the wine a vanilla and chocolate flavor.

Bonarrigo said the winemakers at Messina Hof are responsible for blending the tastes and bottling the wines to create flavors from the dry white wine, Sauvignon Blanc, to the award-winning premium red wine, Paulo.

Bonarrigo said the whole point of port blending is to enhance the natural favor already evident after the fermenting process.

"Just as an artist uses shading in painting to express emotions, we try to do that with the wine," Bonarrigo said.

Since Messina Hof introduced its first commercially available wine in 1983, the winery has gone on to win awards and expand. Bonarrigo said the winery produces about 200,000 gallons of wine annually and sells more than 95 percent of its wine in Texas.

"Texans would rather buy Texan wine," Bonarrigo said.

Messina Hof is making a name for itself. In addition to being a positive economic factor in Texas industry, the winery has grown into a tourist destination in the Bryan-College Sta-

tion area, with a bed and breakfast and a restaurant with a gourmet menu. Its wines were featured in the *The Evening Star* and a Messina wine is the official wine served to 750,000 tourists who visit the Bush Library every year.

The Villa bed and breakfast features 10 private rooms named after romantic and historical characters like Napoleon and Josephine, Romeo and Juliet. The breakfast is open year-round. Packages usually include breakfast, lunch, wine tasting, cheese and dinner in the guest's room. The Villa is furnished to look like an 18th-century estate with antiques, paintings and stained glass.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MESSINA HOF, PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY RUBEN DELUNA

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