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# Dunne on wine: Good things from small vintners

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The California State Fair commercial wine competition each year names one of its competitors the Golden State Winery for best overall showing based on a ratio of medals and honors to number of entries.

Traditionally, this honor has gone to a large corporate winery with an extensive lineup of wines. Recipients have included such high-profile producers as Kendall-Jackson, Geysler Peak, Robert Hall and Fetzer.

Smaller producers began to claw their way to the award last year when 13,000-case Jeff Runquist Wines in Amador County grabbed the honor.

This year, an even smaller winery, Chacewater Wine Co. of Kelseyville in Lake County, was designated the fair's Golden State Winery.

Chacewater made just 1,275 cases last year and expects to bottle around 6,000 cases this year. Nevertheless, each of the 10 wines it entered in the State Fair won some sort of medal.

In addition to being one of the smaller and more isolated wineries in the State Fair judging, Chacewater also is one of the younger ones.

Its first commercial wines were released only last year.

Chacewater is an oddity in at least one other respect. About 130 miles of twisting road separate winery and vineyard. The vineyard from which Chacewater draws most of its grapes is in Nevada County. That's where Chacewater's owner and general manager, Sacramento native Paul Manuel, has lived most of his life, on an 80-acre spread just outside of Nevada City.

He was in the construction business in the foothills in 1988 when the 49er fire swept across the site, leaving behind bare land.

Inspired by vineyards popping up about Nevada County at that time, and working with equipment and crew he already had on hand, he began to prepare the land for planting. In 1990, he and his wife, Kellye, started to put down vines. Today, they tend 31 acres cultivated with such varieties as zinfandel, cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, syrah and merlot.

Over the years, he sold the grapes, principally to Fetzer Vineyards of Mendocino County. As that long-term arrangement drew to a close about a decade ago, the Manuels began to custom crush their grapes at Steele Wines in Kelseyville, selling the wine in bulk to various producers.

Then, in 2008, life threw them another unanticipated opportunity. The Saint Gregory of Sinai Monastery at Kelseyville put on the market an olive farm and olive mill it had established about a decade earlier. The Manuels recognized that the 10-acre site was large enough to also accommodate a winery, so they bought it and added crushing equipment, fermentation tanks, barrels and the like.

Some 3,000 olive trees flank the facility. Emilio de la Cruz, who was the mill master for Saint Gregory, has remained on the site to continue to produce extra-virgin olive oils under the Chacewater brand. The Manuels also brought aboard seasoned Lake County winemaker Mark Burch to produce their wines. De la Cruz and Burch make a winning pair.

They both won high honors at this year's Los Angeles County Fair wine and olive-oil competitions, de la Cruz for Chacewater's Tuscan Extra-Virgin Olive Oil, named best-of-show in the "robust domestic" class, Burch for Chacewater's 2010 zinfandel and 2009 malbec, both designated best-of-class wines.

At the State Fair, which doesn't have an olive-oil competition, the special awards that Chacewater won included best California chardonnay, best-of-class among North Coast appellations for its malbec and best-of-class among Sierra Foothill appellations for its syrah-based rosé.

The Chacewater Wine Company 2010 Sierra Foothills North Ponderosa Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon won just a silver medal, but it was among our favorites when we stopped by the winery's Kelseyville tasting room during the summer. The wine is a relatively wiry interpretation of the varietal, its cherry fruitiness punctuated with herbal notes suggestive of artichoke hearts and olives. This subtle complexity is an appropriate fit with the wine's dryness, smoothness and lean yet solid build.

The making of the wine was unusual in that Burch preferred to ferment the juice with natural

yeast that arrived with the fruit at the winery, not cultured yeast added at the outset of fermentation, the customary practice. Natural yeast, often called wild yeast, is a riskier approach but yields a wine more representative of the site where the grapes are grown, Burch believes.

The 2010 vintage was a challenge for California's grape growers and winemakers, largely because it was cooler than usual. The lower temperatures, however, worked to the advantage of cabernet sauvignon in the foothills, generally seen as too warm for the variety to show well. The cooler season allowed the fruit to mature evenly while retaining its acidity, explained Burch. Often, acid needs to be added to warm- climate cabernet sauvignon, but no such adjustment was necessary in 2010, further enhancing the complete and natural aspect of the wine.

Other Chacewater wines we especially enjoyed were the citric and lasting 2011 syrah-based rosé made with grapes from the Manuels' Nevada County estate, the snappy 2011 sauvignon blanc made with Lake County fruit, a richly aromatic 2010 riesling also made with grapes grown in Lake County and the muscular and concentrated 2010 zinfandel from the Sierra foothills.

Both the name Chacewater and the winery's unusual logo — a hooked staff that passes through a "W" near the top, which is crowned with a "4" — trace their origins to a small village in Cornwall, England.

Manuel's ancestors were miners from Chacewater drawn to Nevada County during the Mother Lode's hard-rock mining era. The logo is the mark of J. Whipple and Sons, Chace- water builders who constructed St. Paul's Church in the village in the 1820s.

"We've visited the church and family gravesites several times," Manuel said.

## **Chacewater Wine Co. 2010 Sierra Foothills North Ponderosa Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon**

**By the numbers:** 14.6 percent alcohol, 350 cases, \$18.

**Context:** Winemaker Mark Burch has found the cabernet sauvignon adaptable with dishes from steak to salmon. He's especially keen on enjoying it with an appetizer of strips of roast beef wrapped around cream cheese and seasoned with rosemary.

**Availability:** In the Sacramento area, the wine is available at the Davis Food Co-op, Briar Patch and Natural Selection in Grass Valley, the Placerville Natural Foods Co-op, some Raley's markets and S&S Produce in Chico. Chacewater wines, olive oils and soaps — the latter made by

Grass Valley Soap with byproducts from processing the olive oil also can be ordered through the winery's website, [www.chacewaterwine.com](http://www.chacewaterwine.com).

**More information:** The newly expanded tasting room at Chacewater, 5625 Gaddy Lane, Kelseyville, is open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. daily.

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*Wine critic and competition judge Mike Dunne's selections are based solely on open and blind tastings, judging at competitions, and visits to wine regions.*

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