

Adopt-A-Vine Programs Bring Consumers Into The Family

Jane Firstenfeld

The alluring image of the “wine country lifestyle” is perhaps as appealing to consumers as the beverage itself. Agritourism has become a profitable means of promotion for individual wineries and entire winegrowing regions around the world. While thousands of wineries nurture a sense of connection to their brands through Web sites, blogs and wine clubs, so far, only a handful have taken that connection from the virtual to the hands-on, through adopt-a-vine and adopt-a-vineyard programs. As expressed below by winemakers and “adopters,” these programs cultivate both familiarity and enviable brand loyalty. And, we are told, they are relatively simple and inexpensive to initiate and maintain.

A recent Internet search revealed adopt-a-vine/vineyard schemes in prominent winegrowing regions from Australia and New Zealand to Napa and Washington to Germany, and in less-established appellations including at least two in England.

We contacted half a dozen U.S. wineries with adoption programs to learn what they’re all about. With one exception, the programs are similar in concept; the variation comes with the personal details, which are what makes each special for both its administrators and its members.

An Historic Site In Pennsylvania

The senior adoption program we found was started in 1998, when Joe and Vickie Greff expanded their Blue



Vine adopters at Faire le Pont in Wenatchee, Wash. enjoy getting hands-and-feet-on with the product at four convivial events every year.

Mountain Vineyards & Cellars (blue-mountainwine.com) by purchasing property near New Tripoli in Eastern Pennsylvania, where they planted 20 acres with *vinifera* grapes.

“The property was the homestead of Fredrick Leaser, a Revolutionary War hero whose wagon was used to transport the Liberty Bell from Philadelphia to Allentown, Pa.,” according to Vickie Greff. The Greffs thought an adopt-a-vine program would be a novel idea for gifts. “We marketed it to our wine club, and fortunately, many of our members loved the idea,” Greff says.

Since its inception, the program has sold some 200 vines to 150 members,

with a one-time charge of \$110 plus tax. Although members do not participate in winegrowing/winemaking processes, during their second through sixth years in the program they receive a private-labeled bottle of wine of the varietal type they have adopted. Each year, they are invited to a ceremony where new members are presented with plaques to place on their vines, followed by a reception, “complete with delicious food and music,” Greff says.

The program was featured as a unique wedding gift in *Lucky* magazine. “We have received many referrals from our customers, and over the years we have built great customer loyalty,” Greff says. That loyalty, she believes, “makes them feel they are a part of our bus-

iness. They love coming out each year to the ceremony and visiting their vine and stocking up on wine, which is great for our business.”

Thriving At Four Years

Taylor Brooke Winery (taylorbrooke-winery.com) in Woodstock, Conn. started its adopt-a-vine program four years ago, and currently has about 300 members. It's a three-year package allowing adopters to select a favored bottle of wine every year at the tasting room for a one-time fee of \$44.95 plus tax. Because owners Linda and Richard Auger choose not to ship any wines, long-distance adopters may take all three bottles during a single visit. “We are very flexible with our program,” Linda Auger says.

Adoptive “parents” tour the winery and visit their vine with the Augers or the vineyard manager, and all are invited to participate in harvest on a first come, first served basis, “Although we haven't had to refuse anyone yet,” Auger says.

Richard Auger was inspired to start



Bruce Richards and winery owner Vickie Greff celebrate at Blue Mountain's annual adoption ceremony gala.

the program during a business trip to California, as the couple completed the permitting process for the winery.

“The original goal was to increase cash-flow, and we knew if we made

the whole experience unique and fun, and our customers enjoyed our wine, that we would have customers for life,” Linda Auger says. She finds that adopters become interested in how the growing season is going and why, thus creating an added benefit: “Educating the public on the challenges of grape-growing.”

The costs of administering the program are negligible, Auger says: postage, parchment paper for the certificates, data entry. Taylor Brooke wines retail from \$9.99 to 18.99, and, she says, “Many love the fruit-infused Rieslings,” which retail for \$9.99. See the accompanying box for members' comments on the program.

bers' comments on the program.

All Hands-On In Washington

At Chateau Faire Le Pont Winery (fairelepont.com) in Wenatchee, Wash., adopters happily get down

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Participating in the harvest is a favorite activity for vine adopters at Taylor Brooke Winery in Connecticut.

and dirty during four annual visits to “their” vines. “Every session is hands-on,” says winery president Debe Brazil.

The yearly rounds start with pruning, when members each prune 30-50 vines, select and tag their vines then enjoy a vineyard picnic. For racking and blending, they use winemakers’ tools to create and name their own blend. Members assist at crush, which includes a

stomping contest. Finally, they assist with bottling, corking and labeling, ending up with a custom label. In addition to lunch, “All sessions include an ample sampling of newly released wines,” Brazil adds.

The program has been operating for a year and a half. Membership is \$100 per person per year, and the program costs Faire Le Pont about that much to administer. However, Brazil says, “The loyal customers are well worth it. We wanted to create a core

group of ‘evangelists,’ who would be our internal marketers and loyal customers. We have great success with it.”

Giving Back In North Carolina

Lenna and Frank Hobson, Jr., owners of RagApple Lassie Winery (ragapplelassie.com) in North Carolina’s Yadkin Valley, have maintained a two-part adopt-a-vine program since 2002,

which has grown to 600 members. The basic club membership entails a \$25 one-time fee subject to a \$250 annual total purchase minimum. Then there’s Lenna’s pet brainchild, The Habitat for Humanity Adopt-a-Vine, which requires a \$50 annual tax-deductible donation to the well-known charity.

“Members do not actively participate in any (winery) processes—just enjoy the benefits,” Lenna Hobson explains. Benefits include a 25% case discount, discounts on logo and gift shop items, a newsletter subscription, free wine tasting and a members-only barrel sampling. Plus, of course, for Habitat members, that warm feeling only a tax deduction can provide.

Part Of The Family In St. Helena

“St. Helena Winery was the first to launch the adopt-a-vine programs as the primary vehicle to release our wines,” says Peter Story, who owns the Napa Valley winery (sthelena-

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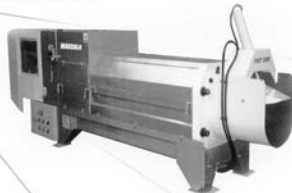
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Vine Parents: Proud As A Pinot

St. Helena Winery adopters say:

"Nothing but kudos for our experience. We visit the 'kids' annually, typically during harvest. We are so fond of Peter that we enjoy having this as a component of our wine habit. And then, there are the wines themselves. They truly rival anything we've tasted coming out of the New World."—David Indorf, attorney, Dallas, Texas.

"On our trips there, we really aren't visiting our vine, but go to purchase Peter's wine. We would join another such program, if the wine were as good as Peter's."—Burt Sweeney, CPA, Danville, Calif.

"The best thing about this is the excellent quality of the wine. I would never have found this small winery on my own."—Warren Spiegel, executive, San Francisco, Calif.

"A local wine shop had some bottles of the 2002 Sympa. I loved the wine, so I ...decided to adopt a vine. I haven't been able to visit yet. I think it's a great way to foster a more personal connection to the wine, vineyard and winery. The only thing I would change are the wine shipping laws."—Steven Eisenhauer, retired attorney/stay-at-home parent, Millburn, N.J.

Taylor Brooke adopters say:

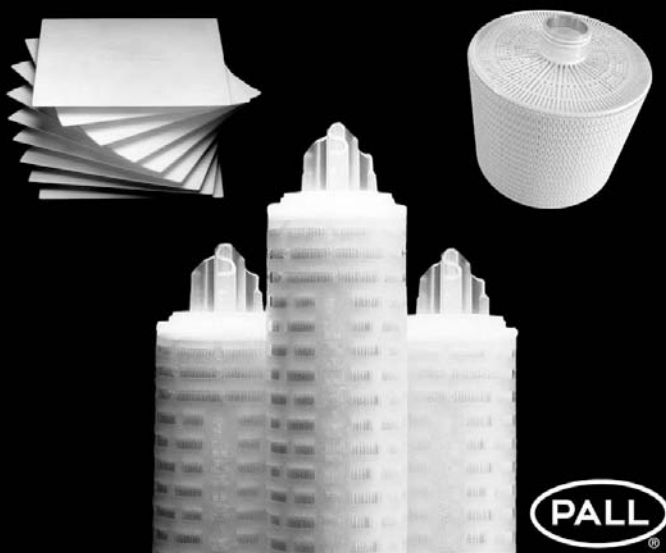
"We stop by the winery several times a year, especially during harvest time, when we bring Brianna and Kaitlyn to see the vine. The most rewarding part of this program is meeting with other owners and friends at harvest time for wine tasting. Our girls find it very interesting how the grapes are crushed and processed into wine."—Beth Baron, school system employee, Woodstock, Conn.

"We knew Linda and Dick were very knowledgeable about wines, and both are such outgoing people. I knew we would enjoy the harvesting and meeting new people. Most of all, the wine is great. We plan on signing up for another three years."—Carl and Sharon Mamigonian, Dover, N.H.

"I had the opportunity to participate in the harvesting of the grapes this past October...the most magnificent day. I am looking forward to many more."—Lisa Bean, bank branch manager, Worcester, Mass.

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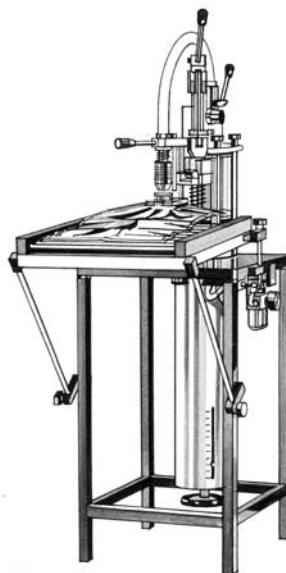


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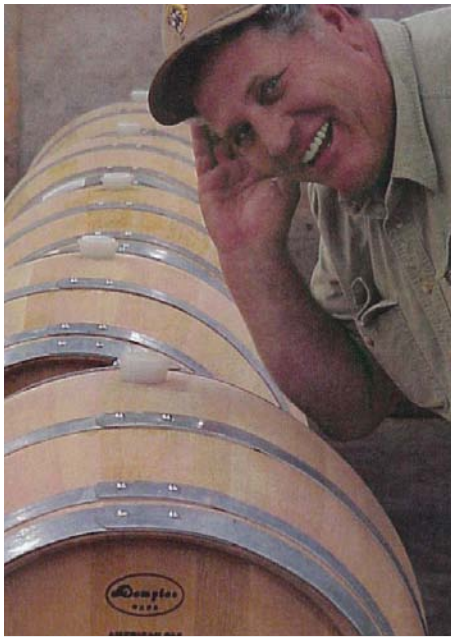
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Owner Frank Hobson, Jr. at North Carolina's RagApple Lassie Winery listens to what his Chardonnay is telling him.

grown to more than 800 adopters, with a renewal rate of some 80%.

The couple wanted to create "An approach that would separate us from the normal wine club...that generated fun and excitement," Story says. Adoptive "parents" visit their vines, participate in vineyard and winemaking practices, and also have exclusive rights to stay in the vineyard guest cottage. For a \$79.95 annual fee, members receive a certificate of adoption, a nametag on their vine and either a bottle of Sympa 100% Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon or two bottles of Scandale Estate Cabernet. They are strongly encouraged to visit frequently, and many do.

"A complete lifestyle has evolved around this little gimmick," Story says, but cautions that, with a membership expenses per year of about \$40 in materials and labor, not including wine, it's "Not a cost effective business decision. Its value is enormous to the lifestyle enjoyment...



When a consumer from Bordeaux adopts one of your Napa Cabernet vines, you know you're doing something right.

winery.com) with his wife, Paulette. The program began with the pre-release of the 2000 vintage in 2002, and has

in bonding with all these customers and friends." Members seem to share his sentiments, as described in the

Grape Expectations

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Just like raising kids, a Personal Vineyard at Mendocino's Brutocao requires a major financial commitment.

10-year memberships range in price from \$39,500 to \$59,500. So far, the program is still in trial mode, with a "small, diverse group of test members to allow us to

tastings, winemaker dinners and accessibility to the entire winery mean "Members are essentially part of the family once they join, and we want them to have the total experience of what being part of a winery entails," she says. "We are building customer loyalty and brand awareness. It also allows us to create more buzz about Brutocao wines."

Increased brand awareness and customer loyalty are something to which every winery aspires. Adopt-a-vine programs are a natural way to foster their growth. ■

sidebar box accompanying this story.

Getting Personal At Brutocao

For the Mia Farrow and Angelina Jolie of vine adoption, those for whom a vine or two just won't satisfy the parental urge, Mendocino County's Brutocao Cellars & Vineyards has a solution: the Personal Vineyard (personalvineyards.com). Participation in this ambitious program, started about three years ago, requires a major commitment:

hone all the benefits and details," says executive director Leslie Bramwell-Smith.

Members may participate in every aspect of the winemaking process, or simply "enjoy the benefits of their wine from their designated vines," Bramwell-Smith says. Each member is allotted 200 vines, from which he receives from nine to 15 cases of wine per year, with custom-designed labels. Perks such as private

Red Wine Contributes Fiber

Red wines contain significant amounts of fiber, according to research published by the Council for Scientific Investigations in Madrid, Spain. Highest in fiber was a Tempranillo/Monastrell blend, with 1.37 grams of fiber per liter, similar to levels found in tomatoes. Grape varietal, *terroir* and winemaking procedures contribute to variations in fiber content.



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