Doctors & wine

Finding a healthy pursuit in the grape

By PAUL FRANSON
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Anyone who hangs around the wine business soon notices that a lot of doctors and other medical practitioners are involved in making wine.

Here in Napa Valley, for example, doctors are principals in Robert Sinskey Vineyards, Ristow Estate, Truchard Vineyards, Dutch Henry Winery, Arger-Martucci, Howell at the Moon Winery, Black Coyote, Revana, Krupp and Veraison, and another owns 55 Degrees wine storage.

Many more are involved elsewhere, and more than a hundred doctors attended a conference on wine and health last year at Silverado Resort.

At first glance, these doctors’ interest might seem obvious: Physicians undergo long training in biochemistry, the same science and technology that underlies winemaking. Look a little closer, however, and you’ll find their interests are as varied as any other group of successful people entering second careers.

One vintner who really applies his medical preparation to making wine is Craig Senders, a professor at UC Davis medical school who also makes wine from Napa and other grapes at Bin to Bottle, Marco di Giulio’s custom-crush facility in south Napa only 45 minutes from Senders’ home.
Senders’ father was an internal medicine specialist, but he ended up a surgeon and is now an academician. Craig Senders, who grew up in Portland, Ore., studied and practiced in the Midwest before deciding to move to warmer climes. He came to Davis in 1984 and is now the residency director of otolaryngology (ear, nose and throat) and director of the Cleft and Craniofacial Program at UC Davis.

When he moved to Davis, he had only a drinker’s interest in wine. “In those days, we could afford a $28 bottle of Caymus Special Select on canoeing trips on the South Fork of the American River,” he laments. That wine now costs more than $100.

Then Senders started helping neighbor Henry Spoto make home wine in 1997, and he was hooked. “Perhaps, it is my academic background, as I am naturally experimental,” he said. Soon Spoto suggested he make his own wine. That led to making his first commercial Senders wine, which is just now being released. It’s the 2005 Carneros Pinot Noir and is available at the Bounty Hunter in Napa.

Senders gets pinot noir from Francis Mahoney’s Las Bresas Vineyard in Carneros, and Bordeaux varieties from the university’s experimental vineyards in Oakville, Galleron Vineyards in Rutherford and Steltzner Vineyards in Stag’s Leap District. He also gets some syrah from the university’s vineyard in Oakville.

As a physician and surgeon, Senders has been recognized for his assistance in establishing Face to Face and for his involvement with third world countries, helping the people with facial deformities such as cleft lips and cleft palates. Face to Face surgeons provide free care to those who suffer from deformities caused by birth or trauma, usually war or domestic violence.

With his background in ear, nose and throat, and his interest in food and wine, he is a frequent lecturer on taste and smell, and on wine and health.

Howell at the Moon
Marc Cohen doesn’t make his Howell at the Moon wine, but wine kept drawing the successful urologist and professor from New York to Napa Valley.

He eventually bought 20 acres on Howell Mountain, took classes in winemaking and even got a masters’ degree in marketing to help sell his wine. Last year, he introduced his wine, a rich cabernet made in small quantities.

Cohen says, “One of the main reasons for my interest in wine — aside from the physical and chemical science involved — is that both wine and medicine have unique challenges. Medicine is constantly changing and to be very successful you have to keep up with the new developments and are constantly learning to be better.

“In many ways, developing a vineyard and winery has very similar challenges of changing every year, and constantly learning to try and do a better job each vintage. The challenge to achieve excellence is my driving force.”

**Black Coyote**

Cohen has a howling dog on his label, and Dr. Ernest A. Bates features a black coyote, one that harasses the animals on his Napa estate.

Bates keeps his hands pretty much off the wine. Until the 2004 vintage, Art Finkelstein of Judd’s Hill Winery/Napa Valley Microcrush made his Black Coyote wine, and it just got a 91 from famed critic Robert Parker. Now Bates uses Marco di Giulio, partly because his partners in the winery wanted even bigger wine in the style that seems most popular among collectors.

Bates was a pioneering neurosurgeon, the first African-American admitted to Johns Hopkins medical school, where he is now a trustee. Amid a successful practice, he started a company that acquires and leases expensive medical equipment to hospitals. He doesn’t practice medicine anymore.
He bought property against the eastern hills for a weekend retreat in 1997, and has lived on it full time for about five years, commuting into San Francisco and staying part time in an apartment there.

Ironically, he didn’t intend to have a vineyard or make wine. He just wanted a weekend retreat. “I got interested in wine when I bought a place up here,” he admits.

As for his wine, he says, “I leave it to the experts.”

He made his first wine in 1998, using purchased fruit and grapes from the small vineyard on his property. First planted in cabernet, the property was too cool, so he changed to chardonnay, which is sold to Far Niente. He now gets cabernet grapes from Atlas Peak. He made 800 cases last year.

He does help sell the wine. One way he does so is as a founder of the African-American Vintners Association, which has held well-attended tastings at Copia and plans to do so elsewhere.

He says one of his challenges is that African-American wine buyers tend to buy bottles, not cases. He and other members of the group are investigating ways to get them to buy more bottles, including making the wines more accessible earlier. He’d also like to see the wide interest in wine on television spread to the black media.

Bates is a regular at Angèle, which sells his wine by the glass; it’s very popular there. He’s also donated a room about the African-American diaspora at the new African-American Museum in San Francisco. He has invested in the hot new 1300 Fillmore restaurant as that area tries to regain some of the ethnic flavor it held when it was a black ghetto and jazz center of San Francisco.

**Truchard**

Interestingly, agricultural roots seem fairly common among doctors who make wine. Tony Truchard of Truchard Vineyards in
Carneros was raised on what we’d now call a truck farm in Texas, and he well remembers tending the orchards and other duties as a child. He went on to medical school, then service as an army doctor, which took him to Sierra Army Depot. In 1972, he visited the Presidio, and toured the Napa Valley in the process. That sealed his fate. The next year, he and his wife JoAnne bought 20 acres on Old Sonoma Road across from his present winery. “I wanted to grow things,” he admits.

He got out of the army in 1974 and first practiced in Reno.

He practiced in Reno 13 years, tending his property in Napa on weekend visits. Later he bought a practice in Napa and was active for four years, but the vineyard called him. “I was pretty hands on and busy with the growing, and I discovered that I was making more money selling grapes than practicing medicine,” he says.

His first commercial crops of grapes were in 1977, but he didn’t start making wine commercially until 1989.

The property he chose wasn’t considered desirable then — it was “too cold” — and he was able to buy adjoining parcels at reasonable prices. Eventually, he and JoAnne accumulated 15 or 16 contiguous parcels totaling 400 acres. About 270 of these are planted with another 30 to 40 possible.

Initially, he got assistance from Francis Mahoney, who has a vineyard nearby.

“I wanted to grow cabernet, for even then it was the king of Napa Valley,” says Truchard. He instead ended up with a variety of grapes to see what did best: cabernet, pinot noir, chardonnay and a little merlot and riesling. The riesling did well, but there was no market for it, and obviously pinot and chardonnay were the big winners at that time.

Over the years, it’s become clear that the cool climate produces excellent cabernet and merlot, too, and Truchard still sells 70 percent of his grapes, including chardonnay and cabernet to many producers.
Has the medical training helped him excel in winemaking? Truchard points out that his undergraduate work was chemical engineering, and he’s found it even more useful, particular as winery systems become more complex.

**Revana**

Madaiah Revana grew up in a farming family, too, though his was in India. The interventional cardiologist, who lives in Houston but has a second home here, came to wine as a collector of fine Bordeaux, and even considered buying a winery in Tuscany until he discovered Napa Valley. Now he owns 11 acres just north of St. Helena, where famed vineyard manager Jim Barbour tends his grapes, and cult wine queen Heidi Barrett makes the wine.

With those talents, Revana doesn’t feel any need to get very involved in either growing or winemaking, however. “I talk philosophy with Heidi, but I let her make the wine,” he says, adding laughingly, “I don’t try to tell Heidi how to make wine!”