

The Wine Issue ▶ Plus East meets West in Sonoma | Sherpas among us

# SONOMA

## Women of Wine

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\$6.99 fall 2011



# Home Winemaking

Just don't call Gene Sperring "amateur"

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They don't have a name. They're hush-hush about where they pick their grapes. They all make award-winning wine, but they believe in sharing their home-fermented pinots, chards and zins with friends. That, and food, is what really matters. They're not a club, there's no formal structure, just a lively spirit that binds them, and its name is Gene Sperring.

They are home winemakers, top-notch amateurs who pick, crush and press together. The rest of the process goes on in their own garages, but the crushing and pressing takes place in Sperring's front yard. It's a party. The real secret to their stellar wines is almost a Wine Country mantra—it's all about the grapes. This group gleans theirs from some of the finest vineyards in Sonoma and Napa Valleys. That's right, gleans. Sperring gets permission to pick grapes two to three weeks after the original harvest, bringing in the straggler clusters that weren't ripe enough the first time around. (Where? Don't ask.

For you the answer's NO!) The picking, and the picnics that go with it, are the friendship-building days that bind them. It takes a professional picker four minutes to fill a 45-pound lug box. When Sperring's crew combs through the left-behinds, that same box takes an hour to fill. You need three boxes to get five gallons, and they each need about 50 gallons. That's a lot of bonding.

Sperring started it all in 1974. People have come and gone and right now there are nine winemakers in the fold. No one really seems to know how you get invited but once you're in, access to the gleaned grapes and Sperring's tutelage seems to mean that multiple medals at the prestigious Harvest Fair Competition are pretty much guaranteed. Sperring Cellars wines star at the event, taking home gold and silver medals every year. Last year was a blockbuster when Sperring Cellars won the White Wine Sweepstakes Award for Gene's albarino. He had already won the



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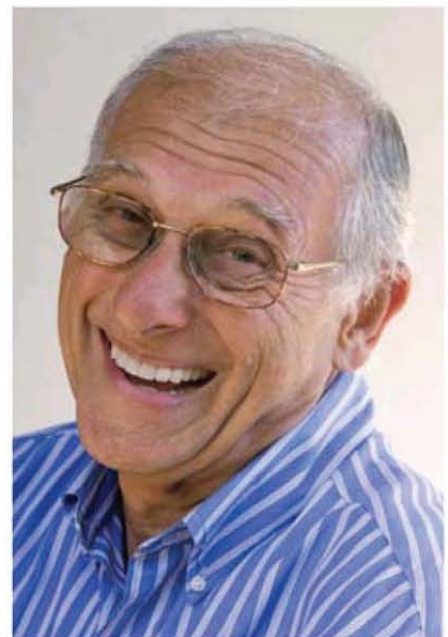
Red Wine Sweepstakes Award for his pinot noir in 2001, so with grand slams in both categories he’s made his mark. “Now that I’ve won both I kind of want to back off and let somebody else win,” he says.

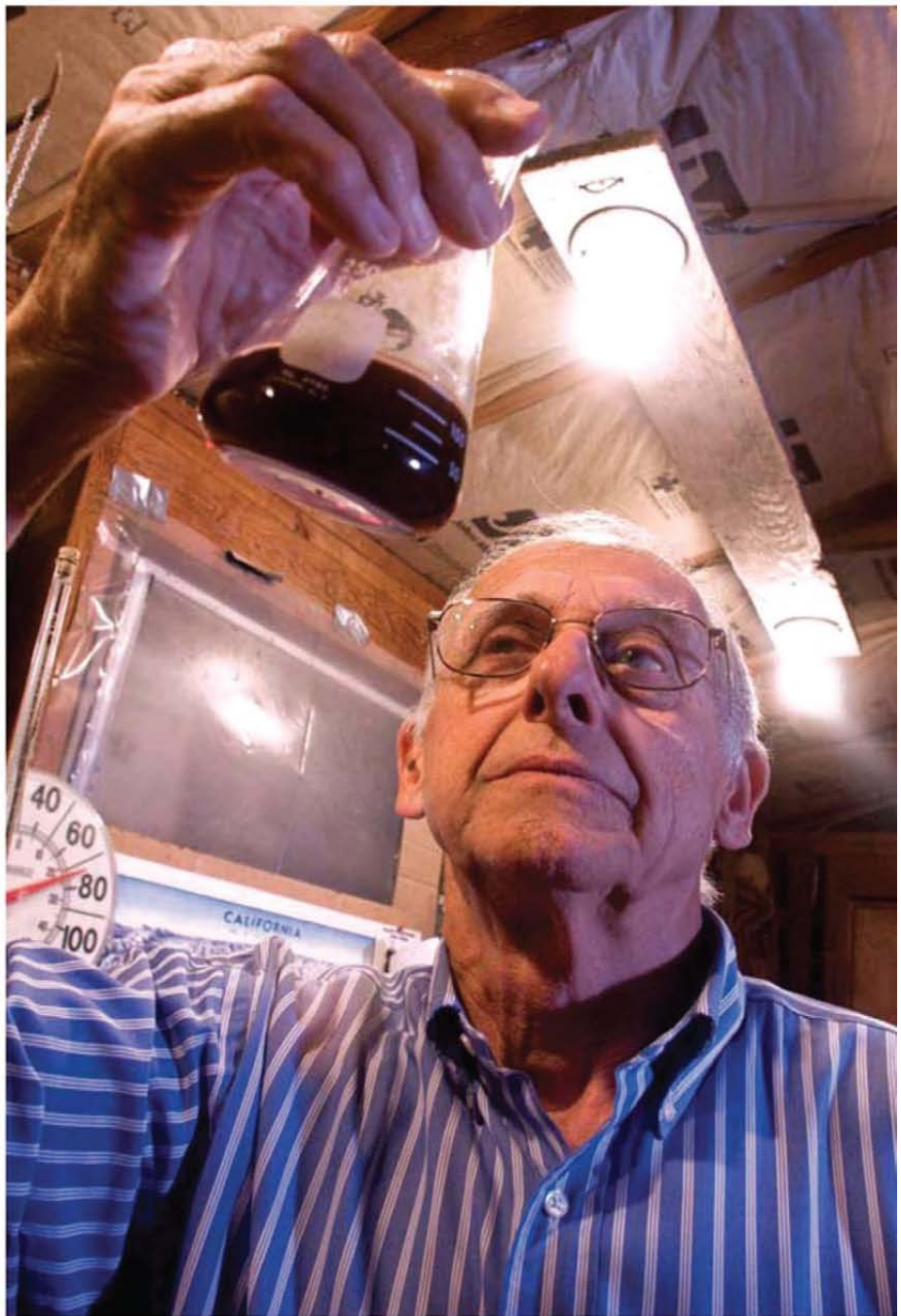
Giving the grapes their due, Sperring’s meticulous crafting in the immaculate back room of his thickly insulated garage is key. He’s at home with the quantitative analysis, the adjusting of sugars and the acids, after a 32-year-career teaching eighth-grade science at Altimira Middle School. His style is to get the chemistry right before fermentation. He’s picked up tips from professional winemakers, too. Ravenswood founder Joel Peterson taught him to let chardonnay ferment naturally, not to add yeast, as is typical. “Every year I sweat it out because it’s slower to start,” he says. The waiting is worth it. His 2009 Sangiacomo Vineyards (whoops, don’t tell anyone) chardonnay won a silver. He ages his wine in small seven-and-a-half-gallon, toasted French oak barrels, which he says are perfect because they are easy to move around and wines don’t require as much time in the barrel.

Sperring and his group make all varieties, based sometimes on what grapes they can get. “We are always on the

lookout for sauvignon blanc because it is so popular right now. It has such beautiful aromas, and you can be drinking it by Thanksgiving.” (Tip: Keep it cold in a water bath while it’s fermenting.) They even trek to Lodi for the trendy Spanish tempranillo, albariño and granache they source from Bokisch Vineyards. Gene makes 20 to 30 cases of wine a year. “It’s for sharing with friends. I bring it to parties and celebrations and I give it as gifts.”

Home winemakers in Sonoma are almost as abundant (and as good) as the Valley’s professional vintners. Many of them grow their own grapes. Sonoma Home Winemakers has oodles of members, with a Web site and bylaws and the full fol-de-rol. Sperring and his gang don’t do meetings, they just gather. Every Tuesday night farmers market you can find them with a bevy of friends, holding down the northeast corner of the Plaza. Sperring sets up the folding tables, one for wine and one for food, and his followers fill them with wow-quality offerings. Recently, he set out his smokin’ good pinot noir and the great grilled romano beans grown in his garden. Tall and thin (he runs every day), Sperring bounds about, gleefully talking wine, his favorite subject.





He's convinced there's a correlation between good winemakers and cooking. "If they're a good cook they catch on really quick. I'm careful if someone wants to make wine and they don't know much about cooking."

"Gene's been our mad scientist for a long time," says Mike Cahill, the retired Sonoma fire chief who's been in Sperring's world since 1997 and enjoys making big reds, mostly syrah. Steve Wyngard, the newest follower with only four years, says, "Gene gives me pointers and he asks the right questions." Wyngard's wines have taken home many medals, and he has even beat Gene. "I was taught extremely well," he laughs. Mark Emery, who won the Red Sweepstakes Award in 2000 and also raises alpacas, calls Sperring an amazing teacher. But it is Steve Van Horn who nails it when asked what their mentor means to them.

"We are not worthy." 5

### *Not an amateur effort*

#### Gene Sperring 2010 Chardonnay

The term "amateur wine" has certain negative implications, suggesting something made from raspberries perhaps, or Thompson seedless.

So, this chardonnay was not made by an amateur winemaker. It was made by a consummate home winemaker, in skill if not in fact, a professional.

Since Gene Sperring will not reveal the source of his "gleaned" grapes we can only say it was an excellent vineyard. Revealing enough oak for a slightly buttery smoothness, it has a wonderful mouth feel, an almost perfect sugar/acid balance and a lovely finish. You could pay \$20 and not get wine this good.