

Al Copp

Al Copp became a true wine aficionado in 1968, when, as a somewhat interested member of a wine buying club, he wound up sitting at a dinner table with two amateur winemakers. He was hooked. He studied all he could on the subject and talked to other winemakers before he tried to create his own vintage.

I made my first batch of wine from concentrated grape juice. To say there was no bouquet was a massive understatement, admits Copp, smiling. Actually, it was pretty awful.

They say that printers have printer's ink in their veins. Maybe it can then be said that vintners have grape juice between their toes. Whatever it was, Al was undeterred by his failure and a few years after that fateful dinner, he was processing about twelve tons of grapes a year in his Roland Park garage.

If you really want to make wine, it's okay to make it with other people's grapes, but sooner or later you're going to want to make it with your own grapes.

So, in 1973, Al Copp met with a small group of wine aficionados and kicked around the idea of planting a vineyard, which they did on a plot of land owned by one of the members near the Gunpowder River, west of I-83. They decided to keep half of the crop for themselves and sell the other half commercially.

Many of us who are occasional wine drinkers tend to think of the good wines as coming from California, France, or Italy. Occasionally, we might take the plunge and try a wine from Australia, Chile, or Spain. However, as I discovered, Maryland wines are excellent. Maryland is on the same latitude as much of the French wine country, explains Copp. The climate is good, and the soil is excellent. The winters are usually mild, and this is good for growing grapes.

In 1983, Al Copp and several of his partners founded Woodhall Wine Cellars (www.woodhallwinecellars.com). They all understood the risk involved, so none of them quit their day jobs.

Al devoted as much time as he could to the fledgling winery, while at the same time managing the City's Charles Center and Inner Harbor projects which were then under development.

We all seemed to be able to keep the winery growing, recalls Copp. When one of us had a job crisis, the others seemed to have some slack time. It always worked out.

Things grew slowly for the little wine company, but tragedy struck in 1987, when one of the partners and Al Copp's best friend, Mike DeSimone was tragically killed in an automobile accident. They were faced with a crisis that sometimes unexpectedly hits a

small business; the death of a partner. Without a formal buy-sell agreement, they continued on with Mike's widow as one of the partners.

Al and his other partners shared the burden until 1990, when one day, Chris Lang, a computer expert, walked into the winery's new facilities at 17912 York Road in Parkton, and began looking around. He and Al began to talk.

You wouldn't happen to be looking for a partner, would you? Chris asked Copp. Call it luck, providence, Karma or just the right place and the right time, the die was cast, and shortly thereafter Al Copp and Chris Lang bought out the other two partners and Mike DeSimone's widow.

Today, 10 years later, Woodhall Winery is definitely making a go of it. Although they produce only a third of the volume of the largest winery in Maryland, they are definitely making their mark.

One problem they face is that they are boutique winery in a boutique industry. The Maryland wine industry is small by any standard, and all of the wine makers in Maryland work together to promote their product nationally.

Woodhall Winery has won a number of prizes at the annual Maryland Wine Judging Contest, and has also won prizes in other parts of the country.

It's nice to win, says Copp, but when you win in another part of the country, you're really winning for Maryland wines.

Just like farmers, wine growers are dependent on the weather. You can grow an excellent crop of grapes only to see them killed off by an early frost. This is why Woodhall Wine Cellars does not depend on their own vineyard.

There are dozens and dozens of different types of grapes, explains Copp. They're grown all over Maryland.

Copp explains that the Eastern Shore produces an excellent Merlot grape, while Northern Maryland produces an excellent Cabernet and Chardonnay grape. The variety is increasing. Many farmers in Southern Maryland are getting out of growing tobacco and are now looking at grapes as a replacement product.

We're always hoping to produce a vintage that everyone will remember, explains Copp. For us, we're usually remembered by the vintage just made. We strive for the best, but when you make a pedestrian wine, you just have to rationalize it.

Fortunately, Woodhall Wine Cellars produces many excellent wines. Their goal is to make each new vintage better than the last.

Remember earlier what I said about the weather? This year's disastrous drought was terrible for Maryland farmers. However, this year's drought has been a blessing for Maryland wine makers, because it promises one of the best vintages in years.

It is something that wine connoisseurs can definitely look forward to. Copp and Lang are looking forward to some memorable vintages

Copyright 2003 Dolan Media Newswires