

YOLO COUNTY



Photos by Noah Berger / Special to The Chronicle

Jenn Wehrli (left) and Julie Harmon sample the vintages at at Miner's Leap Winery in Clarksburg. The area is attracting more attention for its wines.

WINE

Little grape-growing region that could

By Stacy Briscoe

There's a little part of Yolo County that's home to one of California's most overlooked wine regions.

Established as an American Viticultural Area in 1985, Clarksburg is marked by its location along the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, which pulls in ocean breezes and creates a cool maritime climate. Fertile, low-draining soils allow the little wine region to produce 45,000 tons of grapes each year. Here the "heritage grapes" are the crisp Chenin Blanc and the bold, chewy Petite Sirah — varieties that produce excellent stand-alone wines, but also excel as blending varietals.

In fact, 90 percent of the grapes grown in Clarksburg are sold outside the county, predominantly to neighboring Napa Valley. But you'd never know it. A little bit of fresh, acidic Clarksburg Chenin or brawny Petite Sirah can round out a Napa Valley blend — and as long as Clarksburg fruit makes up less than 25 percent of the final wine, the winery can still put "Napa Valley" on the label.

Despite that 90 percent figure, there has been a recent increase in the number of vintners who want to keep more Clarksburg fruit in Clarksburg. Rather than exporting their high-quality wine grapes, they're taking ownership of the full product, from grape to

glass.

The Old Sugar Mill, a 1930s beet processing facility, helped Clarksburg gain steam when it opened in 2005 as a multivendor tasting room and custom-crush site. Today, it houses 14 individual wineries. Visitors can easily spend a whole day winery hopping without ever leaving the building.

But venture outside the Mill, and you're guaranteed to find a few of Yolo's treasures.

There's a sense of solitude along the craggy farm roads lined with vines, altogether more rustic than what you'd find in Napa or Sonoma. There are very few buildings, just a light smattering of modest homes and barns. One starts to wonder, where are all the wineries?

To find them, I took to the single-lane back roads that follow the Sacramento River to discover what Clarksburg's winemakers are creating with their heritage grapes.

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"You're almost there!" reads Julie Russell's sandwich board signs, sporting an attachment of Mylar balloons. She staggers them along South River Road — the main road that leads tourists in and out of Clarksburg — urging drivers to make the detour to her Julietta Winery.

Julie and her husband, Craig, are among the newest kids on the Clarks-

burg block, having officially opened their winery 2½ years ago. Craig, a Napa County native, grew up in a family of vintners, but followed a different career path, establishing his own general contracting business. It was Craig's mother, Beverly, who encouraged the couple to transform the family's Clarksburg property — an unplanted 12-acre lot with an old barn used for storage — into a winery. To hear the couple tell the story, this was more than a gentle suggestion: "She was always saying, 'You have to get into grapes, you have to get into grapes,'" says Julie.

Using Craig's connections in Napa, the Russells started buying fruit from a few trusted grape growers and experimented with a winemaking side business. "We figured it was something we could pursue after we retire," says Julie.

But the couple's "side business" blossomed, so they transformed the barn into a tasting room and built a

winery next door.

Julie, with her personal preference for Napa Cabernets and cool-climate Syrahs, will continue to source grapes from various California regions, in Clarksburg and beyond. However, her first estate vintage of Cabernet Sauvignon, from the modest vines circling the parking lot, is now aging in barrels. She's looking forward to planting more varieties — including Zinfandel, Tannat, Cabernet Franc and Tempranillo — on the property this year, in hopes of producing more estate wines.

Clarksburg's small-town quaintness extends to the Julietta tasting room, where the walls are decorated with works by local artists. Lounge chairs and sofas invite lingering. Outside, visitors can enjoy the bocce ball court, putting green and picnic area — and, of course, the bucolic serenity of the Clarksburg countryside. The Russells are often behind the bar, greeting regulars by name and welcoming those just passing through as if they, too, are part of the Clarks-

TRAVEL TIP

There aren't a lot of restaurants in this part of Yolo County, so be sure to pack a picnic and enjoy the beautiful setting in any one of these wineries. If you're in the mood for some local flavor, Shorty's La Amistad Cafe, on the corner of Jefferson Boulevard and Clarksburg Road, is a long-standing community favorite for Mexican food.

36046 Jefferson Blvd., Clarksburg; (916) 744-1346. Open 7:30 a.m.-3 p.m. daily.