



New Wine

in a grand-old winery

Rob and Diana Jensen have revived winemaking at the historic Novitiate winery

BY DICK BUSHNELL • PHOTOGRAPHY MEL LINDSTROM

Visitors to the Sacred Heart Jesuit Center (SHJC) follow a narrow avenue that winds up a hillside overlooking Los Gatos, Calif. Along the way, they are guided by signs pointing the way to “Novitiate Historic Winery.” Near the top of the hill, they pass the entry to Testarossa Vineyards, which operates the winery by agreement with the California Province of the Society of Jesus. Testarossa proudly carries on the winemaking tradition which began here in 1888, making this facility the fourth oldest continuously operating winery in California. This distinction stems from the fact that during Prohibition (1919-1933) the Jesuits continued to make altar wine for sacramental purposes.

“In the Silicon Valley, where so much of the past is forgotten and paved over, keeping this



ABOVE: Gerald Phelan, S.J., (right), and Aldo Bonura harvest grapes in 1950.
TOP LEFT: Natalie Ullman, tasting room supervisor. BOTTOM LEFT: Rob and Diana Jensen.

winery's history alive is something that people are culturally thirsty for," says Rob Jensen, proprietor and founder of Testarossa Vineyards. As stewards of the winery's legacy, Rob and his wife, Diana, are the latest in a long line of vintners.

WHEN JESUITS LABORED IN THE VINEYARDS

Jesuits made wine here from 1888 to 1986, drawing grapes from vineyards around the Novitiate, at nearby Guadalupe Ranch, and acreage as far away as Modesto. The winery was built to furnish a source of revenue to help support the Novitiate. During the harvest season in October and November, Jesuit novices were enlisted as pickers. The late Father Clinton E. Albertson, S.J., had fond memories of working in the vineyards. "We'd ride out in flatbed trucks to pick grapes all day. They'd bring out lunch and sometimes we'd have dinner in the field around a campfire—it was seventh heaven for most of us." Other Jesuits recall the harvest as a humbling time when grape juice drenched their clothes for days on end.

At one time, they picked enough fruit to produce 150,000 gallons of wine each year, bottling and selling as many as 18 different kinds of red, white, and dessert wines, including a prize-winning Black Muscat. After Prohibition, laymen worked

along with the Jesuits to build the business. For example, the late San Jose architect Joseph Geary, Sr., was responsible for major building additions in the 1930s. Geary's sons—John and Joseph—joined the Society of Jesus and entered the Sacred Heart Novitiate (both are now deceased).

Brother Norbert "Biz" Korte, S.J., who resides at SHJC, served in the winery for 33 years in a number of jobs, including tour guide, tasting room host, sales, and public relations. "We had one of the best tours in the area," recalls Br. Korte. "We took them right through the winery—you could touch the barrels and smell the wine."

In the 1980s, declining sales of altar wine to churches and ever-increasing competitive pressure in the commercial marketplace contributed to the Province's decision to shut down the winery. One day in January 1986, Br. Korte closed the tasting room. "When we closed the doors, there wasn't a case left—we sold it all." On that day, Br. Korte told the press: "Now that it's happened, we'll move on. That's what we're all about. We're here to carry out the order's religious ends. So we're simply moving on."

In the following years, the doors were reopened by a number of private entrepreneurs who tried to revive the winery but were unsuccessful.



LEFT: Grapevines dot the hillside above the Novitiate winery shown here in 1893.
ABOVE: Brother Norbert "Biz" Korte, S.J., served at the winery in many capacities.

HOW THE JENSENS DISCOVERED A NEW VOCATION

Born in Redwood City, Calif., Rob Jensen grew up in nearby Palo Alto. He attended local Catholic primary and high schools before enrolling at Santa Clara University to study electrical engineering. At SCU, he made two life-changing discoveries.

Rob's initial "wine epiphany" came through his college roommate's father, a wine connoisseur who shared some of his choice vintages with Rob. Then in his junior and senior years, when Rob was taking elective courses in Italian, Professor Victor Vari invited him to attend SCU's summer program at Assisi, Italy. There, his host family greeted Rob as Signore Testarossa (Mr. Redhead). Soon, the townsfolk were calling him Testarossa, too—and the nickname stuck. In Italy, Rob says he also learned that "life is about living every day—food, wine, music. I was attracted to the cultural elements."

Reflecting on his student days, Rob says, "The beauty of a Jesuit education is that it's not just educating you academically but as a complete person."

Rob's other discovery at SCU was meeting Diana, who was also studying engineering. "We developed a great friendship, shared many dreams and beliefs, and fell in love," says Rob. Diana, who came from another faith tradition, decided to convert to Catholicism. When she sought instruction, the Jensens turned to a family friend, Father John Geary, S.J., who was then in residence at St. Simon Parish in Los Altos. When Rob and Diana married in 1988, they asked Fr. Geary to accompany them to Diana's hometown where he presided at their wedding in Mission San Diego. Rob and Diana initially put their engineering skills to work at Silicon Valley firms. They welcomed their first child, Nicholas, in 1993, and a second, Claire, in 1996.

In 1993, the Jensens made their first foray into winemaking at their Sunnyvale home, pressing purchased grapes in the driveway and fermenting the juice in the garage—enough to bottle 25 cases. Rob says the first vintage was "fabulous." After that success, wine-making became "a hobby that got out of control," he explains.

Encouraged by George Troquato of the Cinnabar Winery, the Jensens leased a small vineyard in the Santa Cruz Mountains, but quickly discovered that tending grapevines and keeping wild animals from devouring the fruit can be a backbreaking and very expensive task. After overcoming those challenges, they needed more and more grapes to satisfy the public's growing thirst for their wine, stimulated in part by "rave reviews from the wine critics," says Rob.

One thing led to another and in 1997 the Jensens learned that the old Novitiate winery had plenty of space for another tenant. So they worked out an agreement with Father Robert L. St. Clair, S.J., the treasurer at the time. "We leased a small corner of the winery," says Rob. "Growing up, I remember my Irish Catholic mother was fond of saying that certain things were 'meant to be.' So for us being here [at the winery] her words ring true."



GROWING UP, I REMEMBER my Irish Catholic mother was fond of saying that certain things were "meant to be." So for us being here (at the winery) her words ring true.

—Rob Jensen



Today, Testarossa has 15 full-time employees and hires as many as 30 part-time workers to produce 30 unique bottlings of mostly vineyard-designated wines. Testarossa focuses its winemaking on three varietal grapes: Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Syrah. Why not others? “Focus is very important in making superlative quality products,” Rob explains. In his view, a fine wine must appeal to the senses: “How does it taste, smell, and look? How does it feel in your mouth? A very silky finish—that’s our trademark.”

Rob and Diana reopened the tasting room in 2003, not only to share the winery’s history, but so they could sell more wine directly to the public. Two years later, Testarossa resurrected the Novitiate label, adapting the design to show the winery and a new motto—*In Vino Veritas*. Under the Novitiate label, Testarossa bottles Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Noir Rosé.

A portion of the sales of Novitiate wines goes to support the retirement facility at the Sacred Heart Jesuit Center.

As if Rob weren’t busy enough at the winery, he serves on the California Province’s Advancement Leadership Council, a volunteer group that promotes financial stewardship by lay partners in support of the Jesuits’ apostolic works and ministries. 🍷

You can sample and buy wines at Testarossa’s tasting room in the sandstone cellar of the winery between 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. daily (except Christmas, New Year’s Day, and Easter). The winery also has four rooms available to host special events such as weddings and meetings complete with catering service (see the recipe for one popular dish on the opposite page).

For more information, call (408) 354-6150 or go to www.testarossa.com



LEFT: Proudly labeled Novitiate Chardonnay rolls along the bottling line. ABOVE: Sturdy stone walls support the winery's enduring heritage.

Grilled Flank Steak Salad with Plums and Spiced Hazelnuts

Serves: Six

*Suggested wine pairings: Testarossa's Novitiate Pinot Noir
or Sleepy Hollow Vineyard Pinot Noir*

MEGAN REEVES, Club Testarossa coordinator, shares this recipe in which thin slices of grilled flank steak are laid on a bed of crisp greens accented with sliced plums, spiced hazelnuts, and blue cheese.

SALAD

1½ lb. flank steak	2 yellow plums (fairly firm), sliced thinly
2 heads hearts of romaine, chopped	1 small red onion, sliced very thinly
1 head radicchio, chopped	½ lb. blue cheese, crumbled

MARINADE

1½ T. crushed red pepper flakes	1 t. ground black pepper
1 T. fresh thyme, minced	½ c. balsamic vinegar
1 T. garlic, minced	¼ c. soy sauce
	½ c. extra-virgin olive oil

In a small bowl, mix above ingredients. Place flank steak in a large plastic zip-lock bag, pour marinade mixture over meat, and let sit for 20 to 30 minutes.

SPICED HAZELNUTS

1 c. hazelnuts, chopped	1 t. ground allspice
3 T. olive oil	1 t. black pepper
	½ t. salt

In a large sauté pan, heat oil. Add allspice and pepper; toast until just fragrant. Add hazelnuts and salt; toss to coat nuts with spices and oil. Toast nuts until slightly brown and fragrant. Remove pan from heat and set aside.

VINAIGRETTE

1 clove garlic, minced	½ c. grapeseed oil
¼ c. balsamic vinegar	

In a small bowl, mix balsamic vinegar and minced garlic; slowly whisk in grapeseed oil until combined. Set aside.

DIRECTIONS Grill the steak. Preheat grill to medium-high heat. Spray grill with a non-stick cooking spray and cook marinated steak 4 minutes on each side for medium-rare meat. Remove meat from grill, cover with foil, and let rest for 15 minutes. With a sharp knife, slice meat across the grain in paper-thin slices. Drizzle any meat juice over the slices. **Assemble the salad.** In a large bowl, place chopped romaine and radicchio, sliced plums and onion, spiced hazelnuts, and crumbled blue cheese. Pour vinaigrette over and toss. Serve tossed salad on individual dinner plates and top with sliced meat.