

Little winery that could

Tiny Acorn Winery creates top red wine at Harvest Fair

By TIM TESCONI

Bill and Betsy Nachbaur, owners of tiny Acorn Winery in Healdsburg, confess they are still a bit dumbstruck after winning the Harvest Fair's red wine sweepstakes for their zinfandel.

Acorn Winery, housed in the garage of the Nachbaur's modest home, beat out big names like Gallo of Sonoma, Geysler Peak and Clos du Bois to take the top prize, scoring one for the little grape guy.

"We're still in shock," Betsy Nachbaur said this week as telephones rang, fax machines beeped and visitors found their way to the Nachbaur's vineyards along a gravel road off Old Redwood Highway.

Wine lovers want to taste what was judged Sonoma County's best red wine, a 2002 zinfandel, from the couple's Alegria Vineyards.

It triumphed over 645 other red wines to take the sweepstakes award at the Harvest Fair Awards Night Gala on Saturday. Even at \$30 a bottle, the Acorn zinfandel is cheaper than some of its sweepstakes competitors.

Hanna Winery, also of Healdsburg, won the white wine sweepstakes with its 2003 Slusser Road Ranch Sauvignon Blanc. It's \$17 a bottle.

Hanna topped 228 white wines in the competition.

It was the third time in five years that Hanna won the sweepstakes for a sauvignon blanc wine made from grapes grown at the Hanna family's Slusser Road Ranch.

But it was the first Harvest Fair sweepstakes award for Acorn, one of the smallest, most utilitarian wineries to win the sweepstakes during the Harvest Fair's 30-year history.

Acorn only produces 2,000 cases a year, a drop in the vat compared to big wineries like Kenwood Vineyards or



Bill Nachbaur on Wednesday gathers grapes that were passed up by pickers at Acorn Winery and Alegria Vineyards. The winery, owned by Nachbaur and his wife, Betsy, won the 2004 Sonoma County Harvest Fair's red wine sweepstakes award for a zinfandel.

Ravenswood, which annually make 500,000 cases.

The sweepstakes wines and all the gold- and silver-medal-winning wines will be poured at this weekend's Harvest Fair, which runs Friday through Sunday at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds.

The Nachbaur's are quick to share the secret of what it takes to capture the sweepstakes.

"We are all about the grapes," said Betsy Nachbaur, explaining both their mission on the land and what they consider the key ingredient for world-class wine.

This vintage wisdom doesn't come from a farm couple anchored to the land for generations. The Nachbaur's, who formerly worked in the corporate world in San Francisco, chucked their business suits to grow grapes in Sonoma County, becoming part of the white-collar, back-to-the-land movement.

In 1990 they bought a century-old zinfandel vineyard and eight years later established Acorn Winery, which really is more of a label than a winery. The Acorn wines are

made at other wineries because the Nachbours don't have a grape crusher or fermenting tanks. The small facility on their property includes space for barrel aging and tasting, which is by appointment only. The tasting bar is two wine barrels in a corner of the garage.

Bill Nachbaur discovered the Healdsburg property by accident while taking a viticulture class at Santa Rosa Junior College.

Instructor Rich Thomas had taken students to the vineyard to learn the art of pruning. When Thomas mentioned that the property was for sale, Nachbaur contacted the real estate company and bought the 31-acre parcel.

"I pruned this vineyard before I even owned it," said Nachbaur, 60, a former corporate attorney.

For the Nachbours, the prize on the 31-acre property was an old vineyard, planted in 1890 primarily to zinfandel with a lesser number of petite syrah and alicante bouschet vines. Also sprinkled in the vineyard were nine other grape varieties, including carignane, trousseau, sangiovese,

petit bouschet, negrette, syrah, muscat noir, cinsaut and grenache.



Betsy Nachbaur fields phone calls from customers wanting to order Acorn Winery's prize-winning 2002 Heritage Vines Zinfandel, won the 2004 Sonoma County Harvest Fair's red wine sweepstakes award for a zinfandel.

This old-style vineyard was planted in what's known as a field blend. In the 19th century it was standard practice to interplant different varieties of grapes in the same vineyard. The grapes are harvested at the same time and fermented together, producing a blend of flavors. It's a tradition the Nachbours continue.

All 12 of the grape varieties in the vineyard went into the Nachbours' sweepstakes-winning wine, which is 78 percent zinfandel, 10 percent each of alicante bouschet and petite sirah and 2 percent of the remaining nine varieties.

The Nachbours have expanded their vineyards by planting additional acreage of zinfandel and Italian varietals. They now have 26 acres planted to vineyards.

"Instead of being in an office I spend a lot of time outside in these beautiful vineyards," said Bill Nachbaur, "I watch the seasons change and I produce a product that makes people happy. That's rewarding."

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2004

A TOAST TO SONOMA COUNTY'S BEST

By TIM TESCONI and DIANE PETERSON

Abridged Version

Acorn Winery, of Healdsburg, won the red wine sweepstakes for its 2002 Zinfandel, made from grapes grown at the Alegria Vineyard in the Russian River Valley. It was Acorn Winery's first sweepstakes win at the [Sonoma County] Harvest Fair.

Acorn is a family-owned winery devoted to producing the finest wines from grapes grown in Sonoma County. They won the fair's top red wine awards in a competition that counted a record 874 wines, representing 164 different labels.

Bill Nachbaur is the owner and winemaker at Acorn Winery, which was established in 1996. The winery on Old Redwood Highway in Healdsburg produces zinfandel, sangiovese and syrah wines from 26 acres of estate vineyards.

"We're trying to take over what someone planted 100 years ago," he said.

The Harvest Fair is a regional competition open to any winery that makes wine from grapes grown in Sonoma County.

