

Napans win big at Copia wine awards

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Thursday, October 19, 2006 6:17 AM PDT

Napa Valley folks dominated the Copia Wine Awards Saturday.

John Shafer of Shafer Vineyards was named Vintner of the Year; Salvador Renteria of Renteria Wines was Grower of the Year; and the Davies Family of Schramsberg Vineyards received the Lifetime Achievement Award.

Other winners included Greg Gregory, who won Collector of the Year, and Gene Burns, who was presented with the Media Award.

In accepting his award, Shafer recalled some of the things that have made Napa Valley great. "The cooperation among wineries, people who help each other — this is unique to our area," he said. He also cited sustainable farming, which Shafer started in 1989 and which is gathering momentum through the valley, and the industry's service to the community through the generosity of vintners.

Shafer, who introduced his now-famous Hillside Select cabernet sauvignon in 1981, is known for his leadership in creating the Stags Leap District and for his efforts in working with charitable organizations.

Renteria started working at Sterling Vineyards in 1962, formed his own vineyard management company in 1987 and now manages 1,700 acres of vineyards. In addition to owning 64 acres on Mt. Veeder, and in Carneros and Pope Valley, his family has started making its own brand and produces about 2,300 cases of wine. During his career he was responsible for several vineyard innovations that brought lower yields but higher quality, and drew acclaim from winemakers for his efforts.

Renteria drew a laugh from the crowd when he said, "Growing grapes is my life," then with a broad smile at his wife, said, "It's my second love."

Jamie Davies accepted the award on behalf of her family, as her son, Hugh, who now is CEO, stood nearby with his wife and two small children. She recounted the days when she and her late husband, Jack, purchased the property in 1965 to make California sparkling wine in the tradition of the finest Champagnes, and while many scoffed at the idea, the Davies made the dream come true.

Today Schramsberg is mentioned in the same breath as those French Champagnes and ranks with them in quality. The family also has created the Jack L. Davies Fund, which is dedicated to preserving Napa Valley for agriculture and wild lands.

Gregory, a Tampa Bay, Fla., businessman, was unable to attend the ceremony because of a previous volunteer commitment. Emcee Andrea Immer Robinson presented his award nonetheless, saying that 10 years ago Gregory was not even a wine drinker, but the first wine he

ever tasted was a 1982 Haut Brion. That converted him, and today he has a cellar filled with 17,000 bottles.

The presentation to Burns came as a surprise to him. He was broadcasting his noted "Dining Around" program on KGO Radio live from Copia Saturday and had already interviewed several of the award winners. He was set to interview Immer and when the show went live again following a commercial break, she told Burns that he had won the Media Award. He sputtered a moment, then responded, "I'm speechless, which is bad for a radio broadcaster."

The vintner, grower, collector and media awards were selected by Masters of Wine and Master Sommeliers living in North America, and the Lifetime Achievement Award was chosen by a panel consisting of wine notables Jancis Robinson, Robert Parker and Hugh Johnson.

Preceding the awards ceremony, Peter Marks and Burke Owens, Copia's Wine Guys, conducted a tasting seminar for Copia members, featuring wines chosen by each. They showed why they make a great team, playing off each other like Hope and Crosby, and their disagreement over whether gruner veltliner ever will become a major grape in Napa Valley drew many laughs, as did their comments about what foods go with each selected wine. They did agree, though, that locals will hear more about Spanish grapes in the near future.

The day concluded with the annual Taste of Napa walk-around tasting, which featured more than 50 wineries and about 200 wines.