

Winemakers sharing space on bottle labels

- James M. Meyer, Special to The Chronicle

Wine lovers have long monitored the career paths of star winemakers like Helen Turley, Heidi Peterson Barrett and Tony Soter, buying up any wine these oenological Midases have touched.

But notice is rarely given to the vineyard managers who produce the grapes that the winemakers use. If it's true that you can't make great wine without great fruit, then should not attention be paid to those responsible for growing the best grapes?

Consumer recognition of vineyard managers is in its early stages, but high-end wine drinkers are taking notice. "Among people who are really serious about wine, vineyard managers are starting to get a real cachet in the marketplace," says Chuck Hayward, wine buyer for The Jug Shop wine store in San Francisco.

Vineyard management has turned into big business. Someone has to plant trophy vineyards like Martha's and Fay's. Because few absentee owners have the desire or capabilities to handle the less-than-sexy farming aspects of owning a vineyard, they generally out source the agricultural details to a vineyard manager.

For years, vineyard management companies like Abreu, Jack Neal & Sons, Barbour Vineyard Enterprises, Pina, Renteria and Madrigal have been working behind the scenes farming vineyards for some of Napa Valley's most prestigious labels, including Araujo, Heitz's Martha's Vineyard, Grace Family Vineyard, Showket, Etude and Duckhorn. In Sonoma County, Steve and Joe Dutton have been growing grapes and doing vineyard work for wineries like Kistler, Flowers and Merry Edwards.

Now some of these vineyard managers are getting into the winemaking act on their own, or teaming with winemakers and getting billing on the bottle labels as a result.

WINES FROM THE VINEYARD MANAGERS

Vineyard managers stepped into vintner shoes to produce the following wines.

Some of the bottlings are yet to be released, and others are available by mail order only. Call the companies or check their Web sites for more information.

Barbour Vineyards -- 2000 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$100). Winemaker: Heidi Peterson Barrett. (707) 963-0540; barbourvineyards.com.

Neal Family Vineyards -- 2001 Napa Valley Chardonnay (\$20, available May 1).

Winemaker: Celia Masyczek. (707) 965-2800; www.nealvineyards.com.

Renteria Wines -- 1999 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$40), 1999 Chardonnay Carneros (\$28), 2000 Pinot Noir "Knittel Vineyard" Carneros (\$40), 2000 Pinot Noir "Bertha's Vineyard" Stag's Leap (\$40). Winemaker: Karen Culler. (707) 944-1382; renteriawines.com.

Pina Vineyards -- 2000 Howell Mountain Cabernet (to be released September 2003, price to be determined). Winemaker: Cary Gott. (707) 944-2229; pinavineyards.com.

Merryvale-Beckstoffer Vineyards -- 1999 Merlot Beckstoffer Las Amigas Vineyard (\$40). Winemaker: Steve Test. (707) 963-2225; merryvale.com.

Dutton-Goldfield Winery -- 2000 Dutton Ranch Chardonnay (\$30), 2000 Rued Vineyard Chardonnay (\$40), 2000 Dutton Ranch Pinot Noir (\$35), 2000 Maurice Galante Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$50), 2000 Devil's Gulch Ranch Pinot Noir (\$45), 2000 Freestone Hill Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$50), 2000 Cherry Ridge Vineyard Sirah (\$35). Winemaker: Dan Goldfield. (707) 823-3887; duttongoldfield.com.

Sebastopol Vineyards -- 2000 Dutton Ranch Chardonnay (\$24), 2000 Dutton Palms Chardonnay (\$46), 2000 Morelli Lane Chardonnay (\$38), 2000 Dutton Ranch Syrah (\$36), 2000 Dutton Ranch Pinot Noir (\$30), 2000 Jewell Block Pinot Noir (\$52), 2000 Morelli Lane Pinot Noir (\$46), 1999 Dutton Ranch Pinot Noir \$30. Winemaker: Merry Edwards. (707) 829-9463; sebastopolvineyards.com.

Madrigal Vineyards -- 2000 Petite Sirah, Larkmead, Napa Valley (\$35), 2000 Zinfandel, 1/2-Mile North of Calistoga, Napa Valley (\$25), 1999 Merlot Napa Valley (\$28). Winemaker: Jack Ryno. (800) 848-9630; napawineco.com/madrigal.html.