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Father-son project restores a ghost winery on Howell Mountain

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It's yet another crush in the Napa Valley and Nils Venge is as excited as a five-year-old turned loose in a candy store.

You'd think by now, after more than three decades of harvests, Venge would be a bit more jaded about this annual winegrowing ritual.

Instead, he's all het up over a brand new wine venture. No, not a new consulting winemaker job. This time he's working side by side with his son, Kirk, on a venture that will take Venge Vineyards to the next level in wine production.

Father and son have painstakingly restored a 19th century winery on Crystal Springs Road founded in 1891 by Swiss/Italian immigrant Carlo Rossini.

Early Napa Valley maps show this tiny enclave of emigrants from Ticino as "Dago Valley," a place where relatives of pioneer grapegrower/winemaker Rossini still reside.

Granddaughter Marilouise Kornell recalls attending holiday feasts on the Fourth of July as a young girl where her granddad capped the day-long celebration with fireworks set off to honor the birthday of his adopted country.

With the enforcement of Prohibition, revenueurs padlocked the old stone winery in 1920. It sat idle -- wine press, fermenters and other implements rusting inside -- until Nils and Kirk Venge took title to this property at the base of Howell Mountain over a year ago.

In June of 2002, the Venges began replanting the land closest to the roadway to the variety Rossini selected -- zinfandel.

They also contacted Nordby Construction of Santa Rosa, engaging the firm to tackle both winery restoration and carving 7,000 square feet of wine caves into the base of the mountain.

The Venges intended to make the Rossini Ranch a state-of-the-art venture, yet one that incorporated both love of nature and acknowledged the property's historic importance.

Winery leveled, rebuilt

The old winery was leveled to its stone walls and then rebuilt, a striking wood exterior replacing the original rock from the site used to face the entrance to the new cave and nearby steep hillside.

Rather than ship off the old redwood fermenters, Kirk Venge recycled them for interior wainscoting.

On the practical side, new stainless steel fermenters were installed in the restored winery, with racking tanks placed at strategic locations in the newly blasted cave to be used during the aging process.

The Venges asked Montana artisans Rick and Rita Holmes to craft rustic wall sconces that soften glaring lights as well as elk antler-adorned wagon wheel chandeliers for the cave's Great Room - - a space that should prove ideal for entertaining invited winery guests.

In addition to both zinfandel and petite sirah grown on the Rossini Ranch, sangiovese and charbono fruit, as well as zinfandel from a long-term Calistoga grower, will be crushed, fermented, aged and bottled at the new winery. In fact, the winery is in middle of its first crush

at this very moment.

Veteran winemaker Venge says the zinfandel production at his Saddleback Cellars will shift to Rossini Ranch, while the cabernet sauvignon effort will remain at the Oakville facility.

Production of Rossini Ranch grapes will be small at first, the father-and-son team points out. But Rossini Ranch will be noted on the label once estate-grown fruit is used to make vineyard-designated wines.

Asked what prompted him to add yet another production facility to his operation, Nils notes that he was running out of room at Saddleback. "And there's no tasting room," he adds, pointing to a deluxe second story tasting room built into the new Rossini winery. "On top of that, I've always wanted to have caves."

Only yesterday

Nils Venge loves winegrowing. With an infectious smile, kind words and talent to burn, Venge has made his mark in the Napa Valley since launching his career here in 1970.

Raised in the San Gabriel Valley, Venge grew up around wine. His father imported wine and spirits and, for a number of years, served as Southern California sales agent for both Beringer and Concannon Vineyards. Venge worked for his dad while in college.

A stint in the U.S. Navy followed Venge's securing his enology degree at UC Davis. In fact, he spent nearly a year in Vietnam working as paymaster for both Marines and Navy personnel.

When Venge returned to the states, he headed straight for the Napa Valley. It was 1970 and Peter Mondavi Sr. offered Venge the first job in his chosen field. While at Charles Krug, Venge wound up planting more than 800 acres of new vineyard in Carneros and Yountville.

His next job came as Sterling Vineyards was getting off the ground. Classmate/winemaker Ric Forman offered him a job planting new vines for the Sterling operation. When the McWilliams family decided to start up Villa Mt. Eden, it was Venge who was tapped to head up the winemaking operation. He spent a decade making impressive cabernets here.

Recognized as a winemaker who understood Bordeaux varieties, Venge was asked by Dennis Groth to run his new winemaking venture in 1982. Venge's efforts were recognized in the late '80s when celebrated wine writer Robert Parker Jr. gave the Groth 1985 reserve cabernet sauvignon a perfect score of 100.

While working at Villa Mt. Eden, Venge purchased a 17-acre parcel along Money Road in Oakville. It was planted to cabernet sauvignon and remains home today to Saddleback Cellars.

In addition to Saddleback Cellars and the new Rossini Ranch project, Venge serves as consulting winemaker for a number of other valley projects, including Keenan, PlumpJack, Tudal, Del Dotto and Moss Creek.

Son Kirk followed in his father's footsteps, securing a degree in enology at UC Davis. He was a member of the winemaking team at Mumm Napa from 1995 to 1999. In November of '99, he joined his father at Saddleback Cellars. And, like his dad, he is consulting on seven different winemaking projects.

Father intends to run the Saddleback operation, while son will oversee the new venture at Rossini Ranch.