

# THE SACRAMENTO BEE

## FOOD & WINE



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**John and Lane Giguere**, above, farm 40 acres of tempranillo grapes at their Crew Wine Company winery in the Dunnigan Hills of northern Yolo County, left. While the Spanish-rooted wine is not a big seller here, they have faith its day will arrive. Their older oak barrels top left, highlight fruit over wood.

## Lost in translation

### Yolo couple yearns to boost Spanish grape's profile in U.S.

By Mike Dunne, *Special to the Bee*

**O**n paper, tempranillo should be one of California's more popular varietal wines. As the backbone of Spain's glorious Rioja wines, it has reliability, tradition and nobility going for it.

Little of that history and prestige has traveled well across the Atlantic and across the United States to the vineyards of California, however.

Wine enthusiasts are aware of tempranillo, but few get excited about it.

"It's amazing how many people know the name," says Lane Giguere.

"At tastings, tempranillo is the most popular wine on our table, but that froth hasn't developed in the market," adds her husband, John Giguere.

No winemaking couple in California has more faith in tempranillo. But its day will come, they are convinced. If and when it does, much of the credit should go to the Giguieres.

They've embraced tempranillo for two decades, first at their winery R.H. Phillips and now at their winery Crew Wine Company, both in the Dunnigan Hills of northern Yolo County.

By their experience, they know that wine consumers have heard of tempranillo. People are familiar with its Spanish roots. They appreciate that it adapts to a wide range of foods (think of the diversity of tapas). They like to say the name, a veritable song that trips off the tongue, evocative of both lacy shawls and jangly spurs. And when they taste it, they often sing of its radiant cherry and berry fruit, its earthy underpinning, its suggestions of tobacco leaves, coffee beans and cocoa, its supple tannins.

But, curiously, all those positives haven't yet translated into much buzz or many sales for tempranillo made in the United States. Several reasons account for that.

The competition is keen, not only from Spain, where tempranillo is the most widely cultivated black grape, but within the United

States, where other red wines – cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir, zinfandel, merlot – rule the market, making it difficult for other reds to squeeze in.

What's more, not many American vintners yet make tempranillo. Consumers smitten with the varietal have to hunt for it. And for those winemakers who have added tempranillo to their lineups, several price them at levels more in line with established than introductory varietals.

But the Giguieres are undaunted. They've been cultivating tempranillo since 1990, and their confidence in the variety has only been emboldened. The American palate likes bright fruit flavors in red wines, and that's just what tempranillo delivers when grown in the right spots and handled with precision.

When the Giguieres started to plant the grape, they owned R.H. Phillips at Esparto. Their success with R.H. Phillips, however, was due less to tempranillo than to their wildly popular chardonnay, marketed



## MATCHBOOK 2008 Dunnigan Hills Tempranillo

**By the numbers:** 13.9 percent alcohol, 5,400 cases, \$15

**Context:** The wine's sweet fruit and gentle tannins make it one of those occasional reds that can be savored entirely on its own, but it also has the sturdiness and length to pair with assorted red meats, even when they are assertively seasoned. As a measure of the wine's versatility, the most popular outlet in the country for the tempranillo is the Italian restaurant Biba in midtown Sacramento, which sells 100 cases a year of the wine.

**Availability:** Crew Wine Company releases, including the Matchbook tempranillo, are widely available in the Sacramento area. Nugget Markets has been a longtime fan of wines by the Giguieres. Also, look for Matchbook wines at the Davis Food Co-op, Corti Brothers, Taylor's Market, Raley's/Bel Air, BevMo and Henry's. Wines also can be ordered online through the winery's website, [www.crewwines.com](http://www.crewwines.com). Because of the isolation of the winery, it doesn't have a tasting room.

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under the name "Toasted Head."

They sold R.H. Phillips in 2000, and by 2005 had eased themselves out of executive roles with the new owners and into retirement in Sacramento. That lasted a year.

They missed the business, and they relished the challenge of starting over, so they created Crew Wine Company, the name inspired by their hiring of several of their former employees at R.H. Phillips. At first, they made wine in leased quarters, but in 2008, they built their own winery in the rolling rangeland of Zamora, four miles southeast of R.H. Phillips, now vacant after its owners, Constellation Brands, moved winemaking to another plant in Lodi.

At Crew Wine Company, the Giguieres release wines under four brands — Matchbook, Mossback, Sawbuck and Chasing Venus. Chardonnay still is a principal player in their portfolio, though they've lightened their style since their "Toasted Head" days, when the rich fruit of their chardonnay was overlain with vanilla and smoke from new oak barrels.

Today, they call their Matchbook chardonnay "Old Head," a signal that it's made with older, less intrusive oak barrels, thereby highlighting fruit more than wood.

The Giguieres farm 40 acres of tempranillo, perhaps more than any other grower in California. And across Road 92B from Crew Wine Company, they've ripped 400 acres of a newly acquired 2,100-acre spread for additional vineyards and olive orchards,

including 30 more acres of tempranillo. (Slightly less than 1,000 acres of tempranillo are grown in California.)

Crew Wine Company winemaker Dan Cederquist says that when he was hired shortly after the winery was founded, the Giguieres directed him to "make the absolute best tempranillo" in the market. Toward that goal, they've adopted several labor-intensive procedures in both vineyard and cellar. Their methods range from dropping to the ground any bunches showing any green grapes as harvest is about to commence to fermenting the juice in small open-top bins.

The Giguieres are happy with the clone of tempranillo they've settled on, at least for the time being, but they're also excited about several new clones being released by UC Davis and with which they will experiment in their new vineyard.

Their current release of the varietal, the Matchbook 2008 Dunnigan Hills Tempranillo, is dry and medium-bodied, with flashes of dark garnet, a forthright scent, and red-fruit flavors notable mostly for their juiciness, complexity and lingering finish. It's nicely balanced, without the rigid tannins that often restrict immediate access to the varietal's friendly fruit.

I liked it when I tasted it not long ago in the vineyard where the grapes were grown, and I liked it when I didn't know I was tasting it this spring at the Riverside International Wine Competition in Temecula.

There, it simply was designated wine No. 354 in a class of 10 tempranillos. I wanted to give it a gold on the strength of its distinctive blackberry and raspberry flavor, its ready accessibility and its exotic complexity, but I was in the minority, though it did get a silver medal.

The wine's complexity, incidentally, comes at least in part from Cederquist's blending. Though the wine is mostly tempranillo — 87 percent — he added 9 percent graciano and 4 percent cabernet sauvignon, to firm up the wine's structure while adding an herbal element and a bit more acidity.

Tempranillo also is the foundation of what the Giguieres consider their most important red wine, the aptly named Matchbook 2007 Dunnigan Hills Tinto Rey, a weightier, spicier and more deeply fruity and richly textured wine. It's made with 44 percent tempranillo, 36 percent syrah, 13 percent cabernet sauvignon, 5 percent graciano and 2 percent petite sirah.

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*Longtime wine critic and competition judge Mike Dunne continues his relationship with The Bee as a contributing columnist to the Food & Wine section. His wine selections are based solely on tastings, judging at competitions, and visits to wine regions. Check out his blog at [www.ayearinwine.com](http://www.ayearinwine.com), and reach him at [mikedunne@winegigs.com](mailto:mikedunne@winegigs.com).*