

Back to the Future

Illahe Vineyard uses old-fashioned methods for '1899'



Photo by Pete Strong

Illahe Vineyards' national sales manager Bethany Ford drives a loaded wagon past the winery near Dallas Thursday.

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DALLAS -- Illahe Vineyards in Dallas has developed a reputation for using practices that are outside the norm.

For instance, instead of tractors ferrying bins of grapes to the winery, a pair of Percheron draft horses, Doc and Bea, have been pulling in the harvest since 2007.

This year, however, it won't just be the carbon-footprint reducing vineyard practices that will set Illahe apart.

Illahe will soon release a wine with a working name of "1899" that has been produced without technology or winemaking techniques developed or widely used after 1900.

Sounds insane, right? Winemaker Brad Ford and the Illahe crew would agree.

"We realized at some point that we could do it the same way they did over a hundred years ago," said Ford, explaining his brainchild. "So if we made it without stainless (steel), without electricity, without motors, it could be from the 19th century."

Ford was aware that this wouldn't be a small project -- even if it only involved three barrels of wine.

"This was such a crazy idea, I kind of had to get approval from the people I work with," Ford said, smiling.

Thankfully, he had the support of his assistant winemaker, Gabriel Jagle, and eventually Illahe's national sales manager, Bethany Ford, who also happens to be Brad's wife.



Photo by Pete Strong
Illahe winemaker Brad Ford, sales manager Bethany Ford and Doc the draft horse with a bottle of 1899.

"I thought he was crazy, yeah, to be honest," she said. Lowell Ford, the owner of the vineyard, admitted he thought the idea was a head scratcher, too, but embraced the concept as a way to distinguish the vineyard from the other 450 in Oregon. Their belief in the concept was rewarded, as 1899 developed into a success, albeit one that required an enormous amount of work.

A long journey to winemaking past

Thursday afternoon Doc and Bea were harnessed to a wagon, patiently waiting for Brad and company to load the 72 cases of bottled 1899 for the less-than-a-mile trip from Illahe's hilltop winery to its storage facility off Ballard Road southeast of Dallas.



Photo by Pete Strong
Bethany Ford drives draft horses Doc and Bea and their wagon full of wine from the winery to the storage facility with pointers from teamster Mark Sougstad, right.

1899 has been in the bottle for six weeks, so Brad and Bethany decided to open one Thursday to see how it was coming along.

"The wine is awesome," Bethany said.

Lowell is pleased, too.

"I'm tasting it and thinking `Ah. It's got a future,'" Lowell Ford said. "That wine is going to get better and better and better. It would be one that would be more exciting if you could taste it about five years from now."

Soon, wine enthusiasts will have the chance to do both -- try it now or save it for later -- as it's slated for release later in July.



Photo by Pete Strong

After fermentation in a wooden tank, instead of stainless steel, the grape skins and stems are placed in a "crush tank" that will be compressed to extract all of the juice.

Thursday's short trip from the winery to storage facility to await labeling is the culmination of a process that began in the fall of 2011, when the grapes used to make this vintage of 1899 were brought in from the field.

Harvest was business as usual, with Doc and Bea pulling the handpicked pinot grapes via wagon to the winery. From there, the process took a dramatic turn away from current commercial practices.

To make the project as authentic as possible, Brad purchased wooden fermenters (instead of stainless steel), a manual destemmer and specialized tools for making wine the old-fashioned way.

The crew committed to moving and handling the wine only with human and horsepower -- which meant using plenty of buckets and Brad jumping in the fermenter to scoop the wine out by hand at one point. Bottling was gravity-powered and corks were inserted by hand.

Destemming turned out to be a particularly arduous process.

It required someone to turn the hand crank -- for hours. Bethany has vivid memories.



Photo by Pete Strong
Winemaker Brad Ford, top, peers out from a wooden fermenter during the winemaking process last fall.

"The first day we hand-cranked the stems ... I was dumping buckets of grapes while Brad was hand-crank destemming," she said. "I remember saying `Brad, why are we doing this?' It took a long time. It took all day. If we had used the electric destemmer, it would have taken an hour."

Brad said after wearing themselves out, they ended up throwing whole clusters – stem and all -- into the fermenter. Leaving the stems produces a high amount of tannin, the substance that gives wine its "bite."

Brad said he could taste the difference.

"It started out noticeably more tannic than the rest of our wine, but it smoothed out over time," he said.

As Lowell noted, that smoothing process will continue.

Brad said fermentation also varied. He wanted to use "native fermentation," meaning he didn't add yeast to push the process along and sealed the fermenter

to make sure no foreign yeast-carrying objects dropped in by accident. While the rest of his fermenters were busy making wine within hours, 1899 took a terrifying -- from a winemaker's standpoint -- 10 days to start going. "Good" yeast -- the type that triggers fermentation -- does live on wine grapes in small quantities, but so does another undesirable variety.

"It's scary because they know that spoilage yeast lives there, too," Brad said. "Those are easy to find. They live in the vineyard."

He was hoping there was enough of the right kind of yeast to transform the grapes' sugar into alcohol and stop the spoilage yeast in its tracks. After an uncomfortably long wait, Brad found he had been right.

"The exciting thing is that it worked," Brad said. "The wine tastes great. It's a good wine; it's an interesting wine. I don't know if I want to pour it for The Wine Advocate or Wine Spectator, but I probably will."

Then after a short pause, he added: "Why not? Let's see what they think."

More new old practices at Illahe

Winemaker Brad Ford was so pleased with the first batch of 1899 that he's more than doubled the amount set aside from the 2012 harvest.

"We are going to do it again, much to everybody's chagrin," Brad said, chuckling. Illahe's nod to traditional winemaking likely won't end with 1899, however.

The vineyard built a kiln to fire clay pots for wine fermentation and has plans to build a "wine cave" to store wine. Brad said caves are natural temperature stabilizers that won't get too cold and will "suck" heat from the fermenting wine to eliminate the need for artificial cooling.

"We are always working on new ideas," Brad said. "1899 is just one step. This is not the end of what we are doing."