

Cricket Hill Winery's merlot has something extra

Owners aim for stronger aroma, long finish with mix of several years' grapes

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Cricket Hill is a new winery but, then again, not exactly new. The vineyard was planted in 1991. After years in the San Francisco Bay Area and then Boston, the owners, Duane and Kathy Bowman, moved to the property in 1994 and for several years sold their grapes to other wineries.

Then in 2001 they began bottling under their own label.

The winery has only one currently released wine, but it's not exactly ordinary. Cricket Hill's 2002 Hillside Select Merlot is a merlot but also a blend. It's 92 percent 2002 Merlot, 3 percent 2001 Merlot and 5 percent 2002 Cabernet Franc. A multiyear Bordeaux blend.

Duane, the winemaker, favors a longer "hang time" for their grapes. Cricket Hill is usually the last to harvest in the fall. That can be tricky, he says, because we risk spoilage, but the extra-ripe grapes produce a wine with more intense aromas, longer finish, jammier flavors and greater complexity.

Duane Bowman, as winemaker, believes the soil and hillside location at Cricket Hill resembles the best vineyards of France and is especially suitable for growing merlot. The acreage is small but densely planted, with about 1,200 plants per acre compared to the normal 600-800.

Cricket Hill 2002 Hillside Merlot is indeed an interesting wine. It sells in the \$25-and-up range and is usually found at places like Rogue Creamery in Central Point, Pacific Wine Club in Medford and Chateaulin in Ashland, as well as at the winery. It's their first wine, with only 45 to 50 cases available. Bowman figures their next wine will be a 2004 release, also a blend.

The name?

"We are such a tiny vineyard and winery that we also wanted our name to reflect that fact," Bowman explains. "We're like the little cricket — small, friendly, cute but when you hear its song (our wine), it's hard to believe it came from such a tiny source."

The tasting room will be open from noon to 5 p.m. weekends through September, also by appointment. There is no tasting fee. Call 899-7264.

To find it, take Highway 238 to Ruch, then Upper Applegate Road to its intersection with Little Applegate. The winery is on the left, just past milepost 2.