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“Great wines have special character — they’re as different as a face. There’s a bland sameness to large commercial wines that isn’t in step with our philosophy of winemaking,” responded Duane Bowman, Cricket Hill’s winemaker, to my question about his winemaking style. “I want to make wine that expresses the unique attributes of this land and I want a vintage to mean something — to be different from the year before so it reflects Mother Nature’s gift for that year,” he concluded.

Duane and his wife, Kathy, the owners and entire operation staff, spent considerable time exploring Napa Valley in the 1980s — back before Napa became overcrowded. Then, they could take the time to visit with the winemakers and develop an unabashed joy for wines. As payback, he does the same for visitors to Cricket Hill.

He learned winemaking through selected University of California–Davis classes plus trips to France. When the time came he and Kathy decided to jettison the academic and make the wines they had grown to love. They joined early area vineyard pioneers, choosing the Applegate Valley for its match against the soils and climate of Bordeaux, France - where they produced his personal favorite wines. The vineyard is tiny by commercial standards, only 4 currently planted acres so their wines are rare and very limited in volume.

The couple chose the name “Cricket Hill” to underscore the fact that, although the vineyard is small, the grapes it produces have uniquely intense, full flavors, much like a small cricket with a loud chirp. Part of the reason for the intense flavors lies in the vineyard’s unusual slope, soil types and depths that naturally cause the vines to struggle. . “Struggling hillside vines are known to produce the best wines” Duane said. On that special hillside they planted merlot and cabernet franc, clones of these grapes especially selected and imported from France because of the quality of the wines they make.

He’s installed birdhouses throughout the vineyard to attract “insectivore” populations saying that “the more work Mother Nature does, the less for me to do,” so he farms the site with the help of the birds and beneficial insects - using no pesticides.

Duane practices the winemaker’s art of blending wines, and notes, “Drinking straight varietals is like cooking without seasoning.” His wines can be not only a blend of varietals, but even different vintages. Blends are done to his taste and like a chef he works around the particular attributes of the ingredients. Each Cricket Hill wine expresses a unique flavor profile. It gets back to that point about “sameness” that Duane first mentioned when I arrived. He wants you to swirl, sip and exclaim, “That’s special!” To him, that’s praise as melodic as a cricket’s song.