

# WINEMAKING IN CHANGED TIMES



PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED

The vineyards at Barra of Mendocino.

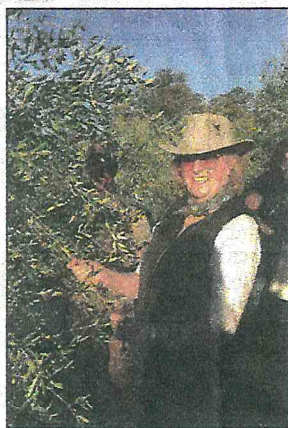
## Barra of Mendocino keeps old traditions

By Karen Rifkin  
for the Ukiah Daily Journal

According to Martha Barra, her late husband Charlie liked to tell the story of how he bought the winery on North State Street three different times. Back in '71, Barra was selling a lot of grapes to Fred Weibel at Mission San Jose so he suggested that Weibel buy a crush facility in Ukiah; Weibel asked him to find a property.

Barra found the land, negotiated a price and bought it—for the first time—from Verona Stinehoff and transferred it to Weibel. In '95, Barra, in partnership with the Pauli family, bought the property—for the second time—from Weibel; and in '07, Barra bought it—for the third time—from the Pauli family.

The building holds the memory of its first owner's product, an inverted champagne glass.



Martha Barra, outside and at home, in the vineyards at Barra, which she oversees with the help of vineyard manager Roberto Gonzalez.

"It looks like the kind we used to drink from—a coupe champagne glass," says Martha Barra, who oversees the vineyards while her son Shawn Harmon runs the family's custom crush facility, Redwood Valley Cellars, and her daughter, Shelley Maly, oversees the three-tiered distri-

bution for their branded, bottled wines—Barra of Mendocino and Girasole Vineyards—that are sent to wholesalers—across the country in 28 states and internationally in Japan, Canada, Denmark and Sweden—that in turn sell the wine to retail stores and restaurants.

Martha and Charlie Barra bottled their first brand in 1997 and today the family grows three white varietals—Muscat Canelli, Pinot Blanc and Chardonnay—and six reds—Pinot Noir (their biggest acreage and biggest seller), Cabernet Sauvignon, Sangervasio, Merlot, Petit Sirah and Zinfandel—on their 325 acres of vineyards, all certified organic.

"Charlie was the big-idea guy and I, coming from a legal background, was good at filling in the details," says Barra. "We made a great team."

Barra, now key to operations, holds the vineyards together by purchasing additional acreage, changing varietals and planting new vines.

"After 40 years of being Charlie's wife and right-hand person, in the vineyards every day, you

have to learn something," she says modestly.

She runs the vineyards with the help of vineyard manager Roberto Gonzalez and has managed the organic certification process, of which she is very proud, for over 28 years.

Charlie was an innovator; he knew from his grandparents that Roundup was unnecessary, that herbicides and pesticides were unnecessary.

"He always went back to how his grandparents farmed," she says. "We made this commitment and kept it all these years because we knew it was right."

Their bottles display accreditation by the California Certified Organic Farmers, a non-profit whose mission it is to "work to realize a future where organic is the norm"—a labeling that requires third party inspection of their vineyards, crush facility and records.

The vines are sprayed with Stylet oil, a technical grade white mineral oil renowned for both its success rate on many different kinds of pests as well



# Barra

FROM PAGE 1

as its environmentally safe and pure formulation, that will prevent mildew and kill leaf hoppers in the nymph stage.

"Everything is about timing when you're farming; we watch very carefully, take the leaves, turn them over, use a monocle to count the number of leaf hoppers," she says.

PyGanic oil, derived from chrysanthemum flowers, is also applied to stop leaf hoppers that, left unhindered, will skeletonize the leaves.

"We don't spray under the vines with herbicides," says Barra.

They use a French hoe plow to pull the weeds away and then leave them for about 2-3 weeks to die and mound up. They return with a sharp, flat blade on a Clemens that oscillates around the vine to remove the dirt.

"You don't want soil to build up against the vines because it will encourage surface roots to grow," she says.

They plant cover crops down the middle of the rows—bell beans, peas, barley, vetch and clover—to provide nutrition.

Pomace from the winery—grape skins, seeds and stems—is turned back into the soil after being cooked in mounds for 9 months, a process required for organic certification.

"In making our organic wines, we are limited in sulfite usage to under 100 parts per million. The wine requires a small number of sulfites to provide stability, protection from oxidation," says Maly.

Conventional wines, not claiming to be organic, can have up to 300-350 parts per million.

"There is, however, no wine made that is 100 per cent sulfite free; it occurs naturally," she says.

Barra explains the process of fining and says that all of their Girasole wines are vegan—no animal products are used—as well as the majority of the Barra brand



Tasting Room Manager Bonnie Butcher serves David and Denise Jessie, new to Willits and to the Barra wine club, outside in the gardens.

wines.

"I've seen our winemakers go to Petaluma, buy 700 organic eggs, separate the yolks from the whites and put the whites in the wine. The tannins cling to the protein of the egg white and fall to the bottom; that's called fining."

As for COVID, they are taking it very seriously and using great care to keep the health and well-being of their employees a top priority.

In addition to extensive sanitizing, they have done educational training for those who live on the property, emphasizing the need for them to remain in small stable bubbles.

"If they live on our property, they have been requested to stay on the property," says Barra. "We provide them with masks, sanitizer, on-site laundry services and make sure they are spaced adequately while working in the vineyards."

Although winters rains have been insufficient for adequate deep watering, they have 200-acre feet of water storage that allows them to provide extra watering for their crop that, Barra predicts, will be small and healthy with bunches that will not size up like they usually do.

Their 6-month, to-date-

report on direct-to-consumer-sales—through website, telemarketing and email campaigns—shows significant gain from last year and on the wholesale side, the first 6 months of 2020 over 2019—including a very good first quarter with new markets and new distributors—shows them up significantly, as well.

"This is not normal from what I am hearing from my peers," says Maly.

With the shutdown of their tasting room in mid-March, able to adapt quickly, Maly and her co-workers have done extensive outreach in marketing focusing on individual sales, offering free shipping on cases of wine and initiating innovative marketing campaigns.

For Mother's Day and Father's Day they bundled their wine, organic olive oil grown from their own trees and included hand-painted greeting cards created by 16-year-old Sophia Lavrov, selling the package nationwide and receiving an excellent response.

Barra and winemaker Randy Meyer created a virtual wine tasting via Zoom with 61 attendees.

Partnering with a woman restaurateur in Maryland, Maly put a 3-course menu together and the res-

taurant prepared food kits and wine; customers picked them up, drove home and dialed in at 6:30 p.m. to share a meal of gazpacho with grilled shrimp and filet mignon paired with their wines.

Barra normally hosts about 60 events per year at the winery and is saddened that she can no longer do so, with special concern for non-profit fund-raisers.

"I've been on boards of quite a few non-profits and understand how important it is for them to have a venue to raise money; it was our way of making a contribution to the community, our way of giving back. This is hurting them very badly," says Barra.

Following the health mandates, the winery is presently open by reservation for tasting outside in the garden area allowing only one group in at a time. Those who stop by are greeted by a welcome sign letting them know they cannot walk in but can call to make a reservation.

"We've been able to soften the blow of the long-term shutdown these past months; we just have to figure out how to keep thinking positively for the next 6 months... and for some time after. This is not going to last forever," says Maly.