

Vintner launches semisweet 'agavé wine'

WINE

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Agavé Garden (agavegarden.com) is not grape wine, but it is fermented in local wine country and shipped in wine bottles. It's not distilled like tequila, but it is made from organic syrup of Agavé tequilana weber, or blue agave. This "fine agavé wine" is the work of custom vintner **Owl Ridge Wine Services** of Sebastopol.

"When people first hear of it, they don't know what to make of it," said **John Tracy**, Owl Ridge proprietor.

Owl Ridge wine-maker **Joe Otos** and Mr. Tracy came up with the beverage in December 2011 as a way to extend the company's line of products, and it helps keeps the winery fully utilized year-round.

Owl Ridge crushed 800 tons of grapes at its facility in a north Sebastopol wine production cluster and bottled 150,000 cases of grape wine for private-label and custom clients. Some of the latter are the proprietors' brands, **Owl Ridge**, **Willowbrook**

Cellars and Sebastopol Hills.

After grape wine comes out of Owl Ridge's stainless-steel tanks, batches of agave syrup from Mexico can go in for a dry white wine-style ferment below 70 degrees Fahrenheit for two weeks at a time. After the result settles, it is filtered, flavored, adjusted for acidity and bottled in flint-colored 750-milliliter Bordeaux-style bottles under screw caps.

Current flavors for the semisweet 11 percent alcohol beverage are peach; "tropical" blend of passion fruit, papaya and mango; ginger; cranberry; and the POG blend of passion fruit, orange and guava. Variations in development include one with slight carbonation for

"crispness," a 20 percent alcohol version and another said to closely taste like a traditional dry sauvignon blanc wine.

Agavé Garden first came on the market last year, and 1,000 cases have been sold so far. It is now retailing for \$8.99 a bottle and is being carried by a few North Bay grocers such as **Oliver's Market**. By word of mouth, some North Coast wineries have been inquiring about buying it to have something novel, refreshing and light for the tasting room or have a sweeter beverage available.

One of four local wineries carrying it already is **Russian River Vineyards**, which added it to its **Corks** restaurant beverage list and in the tasting room. This



Owl Ridge Wine Services proprietor John Tracy developed Agavé Garden as a novel premium product to make after the winegrape harvest.

Forestville winery worked with Owl Ridge to develop a \$19.99 private label, **Agavé Diva**, which appeared in the restaurant and tasting room three months ago. The winery already has sweet wines, but the restaurant only has a license to serve lower-alcohol beverages such as beer and wine, according to winery proprietor **Chris O'Neill**.

"Often, people looking for a cocktail and not beer and wine, so we looked for something to fill that need in the restaurant," he said.