

THE Acorn

Church guild shares in the fruit of the vine

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By Ian Bradley
ianbradley@theacorn.com



PARISH VINTERS—A third of an acre of the property of the Church of the Epiphany on Churchwood Drive in Oak Park is used as a vineyard where church members produce their own wine. Although the wine is not available for sale to the public, one can join the Red Door Vineyard to taste the fruits of the labor. Courtesy of Red Door Vineyard

Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine. At the Church of the Epiphany in Oak Park, parishioners make wine the old-fashioned way.

A third of an acre of the Epiphany property on Churchwood Drive is used as a vineyard where the grapes are used to produce wine.

Steve Stephens, president of the vineyard, said a member of the church choir came up with the idea of producing local wine in 2011. The operation is called Red Door Vineyard.

"This choir member had owned a vineyard in Napa (Valley) for 10 years, so he was our guiding light," Stephens said.

"People are amazed. They think it's a cool idea and we end up making a little money for the church every year through membership fees."

Red Door Vineyard operates under Epiphany's nonprofit license. The wine produced on church land is not available for sale to the public, or even to members of the church. In order to taste the fruits of the labor, one has to join the Red Door Vineyard guild.



JUMP IN!—When the grapes are ready, the stompers will stomp. Courtesy of Red Door Vineyard

Stephens said the organization has about 80 members who volunteer to oversee the process from planting to bottling.

“There’s no requirement of any member. It’s just a matter of coming out and enjoying the process, whether they like to garden or be involved in the harvest, to be involved with processing the grapes,” Stephens said. “The bottling is usually the biggest party. I think we had 45 people last year for the bottling.”

He said the maintenance work is “spontaneous” because the vines don’t mature on an exact schedule. A particularly hot year, or a heavy rain season, impacts when the grapes will be ready for harvest. The process is entirely organic, too, as Red Door Vineyard doesn’t use any pesticides.

Some 500 vines are growing.

Stephens' wife, Stacey, who oversees membership, said because the vineyard has been an "incredible community builder," that everyone coming together to grow and press and ferment the grapes has introduced her to people she would never have met otherwise.



A STEP AHEAD—When it's time to squeeze the grapes, the guild will host a pressing party in which members of the group will wet their feet and stomp the grapes. Courtesy of Red Door Vineyard

Occasional the wine is used for the sacrament of Holy Communion but only during religious holidays such as Christmas and Easter.

"You have to have a certain alcohol content in order to serve communion. . . . It has to be fortified with brandy and we've not been terribly successful with that," Stacey Stephens said. "If we're going to open a bottle and do communion and use the whole bottle, then we'll use it, but generally we reserve it."

Red Door Vineyard offers memberships of varying degrees based on how much the member is willing to pay in dues. The more money put into the pot, the more wine they receive come harvest time.

Stacey Stephens said the yield from the vineyard varies depending on the year, but on average the co-op produces about 70 cases of wine annually including cabernet sauvignon, merlot and petite sirah.

The guild owns the equipment to press, ferment and bottle the wine. They rely mostly on modern technology, but each year when it's time to squeeze the grapes the group will host a pressing party in which members stomp the grapes, just for the fun of it.

Steve Stephens said the process of growing, fermenting and bottling is like "having a new child every year."

"I couldn't be happier. It's a challenge all the time because mother nature deals you different challenges and you never know (what's going to happen)," Steve Stephens said. "But I enjoy it. I love spending time at the vineyard.

"The view looks out over all of Oak Park and it's unbelievable."

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