

## CHEERS FROM THE VINEYARD

# Silkwood avoids Modesto stereotype

BY JACK EDDY

Ask the rest of the world, including most Californians, what a Modesto wine is, and most of the time, the answer will be E&J Gallo - by the jug.

John Monnich, co-owner of Silkwood Wines of Modesto, keeps trying to change the image that Stanislaus County wines are reserved only for the bottom shelf of discount markets with the Two-Buck Chucks of the world.

None of the Silkwood wines costs \$2 and none carries the Charles Shaw label. Instead, they have been judged as the best of California, the United States and the world, with prices that are more than reasonable for boutique wines.

How highly coveted are Silkwood wines?

Try the 2001 Silkwood Syrah that won best of show and a gold medal at the Lone Star International Wine Competition in Texas, a gold medal at the San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition and a gold medal at the Texas Wine Competition. It has been chosen as the best red wine in the world in four blind tastings by Japan Airlines and is the only American red wine that's been added to JAL's first class wine list.

Try the 2002 Silkwood Petite Sirah, winner of 12 gold medals from national and state competitions and recipient of the prestigious "Best of California" award at the 2005 California State Fair.

Try the 2001 Silkwood Syrah Select Reserve that earned a gold medal from the American Wine Society.

Try the non-vintage Silkwood Red Duet, a half cabernet sauvignon, half syrah blend from the 2000 and 2001 harvests. It received silver and gold medals and best of class from the state fair wine judges.

That's all the wine Monnich makes and sells, so four out of four winners isn't bad.

Monnich credits his partner, Rodney Beard, who owns the Silkwood Vineyard along the Tuolumne River in southwest Modesto. It's in a nook where the climate and soil is conducive to long hang time of grapes on the vine to produce big and bold wine flavors with barrel and bottle maturity.

It doesn't hurt that vineyard manager Kirk Jensen and winemakers Jim Yerkes (who Monnich also give lots of credit) and Monnich are able to hand-harvest and hand-sort the grapes so "raisins, pinkos and greenies" are rejected.

Monnich says he overextends the stay of the wine in the barrels from 13 to 30 months. Except for his selected reserve wines, Monnich only uses old neutral barrels with toasted French oak staves to allow the grape flavors to emerge without being forced.

### *Here's a brief synopsis of Silkwood's four red wines:*

#### *2001 Syrah*

Shows the potential of this varietal after 16 months in the barrel with layers of berry and cherry fruit and a soft finish. It has the potential to age for another eight to nine years.

#### *2001 Syrah Selected Reserve*

After spending 28 months in a combination of toasted French, American and Hungarian oak barrels, the wine has a soft nose and deep berry flavors in multiple layers. It's got a big body and a bolder structure, similar to the best Santa Barbara County reserve syrahs.

#### *2002 Petite Sirah*

One of the best wines ever made by Monnich and his crew, it has unlimited potential through 2020. With blueberry and raspberry flavors, this petite sirah is recognizable by the blue tooth stain it leaves. It's in the class of the top Concannon Vineyard reserves, yet the grapes come from San Joaquin Valley, not the Livermore Valley.

#### *Red Duet*

Created with women in mind, it has rich red berry and currant flavors with a silky smooth merlot-like finish. It's being marketed as a great restaurant house-wine.

*That's why Monnich isn't exaggerating when he says, "It is obvious that Central California wine grapes can produce world class wines comparable to Central and North Coast vineyards."*