

El Dorado County winery reuses bottles

By Mike Dunne, Sacramento Bee

Don't know what to do with those empty wine bottles other than toss them into the recycling bin? For ideas, go to the website Pinterest.

Judging by the photos posted there, old wine bottles can continue to provide happy service as hummingbird feeders, chandeliers, tiki torches, wind chimes and that all-time favorite, candleholders.

Brian Bumgarner advocates another alternative: Don't recycle the bottles at all. Instead, reuse them. That's what he's been doing with a line of wines since he and his wife, Jennifer, founded Bumgarner Winery on El Dorado County's Apple Hill in 2005.

Their "Silver Fork" wines – the name was inspired in part by the nearby Silver Fork of the American River – come in bottles with a swing-top clip closure rather than a cork or screw cap. When the bottle is empty, the buyer can return to the tasting room and exchange it for a new bottle of the same wine at \$5 off the listed price. An empty bottle of the bright, rich, barrel-fermented 2010 Silver Fork chardonnay, for example, purchased for \$24, can be swapped for a new bottle of the same wine for \$19.

Bumgarner then washes and sterilizes the old bottle and adds it to his bottling line for the next go-around.

His interest in reusing rather than recycling bottles – indeed, his entire interest in the wine trade – began 20 years ago as he toured Europe. He was struck by the number of consumers who visited wineries, markets and the like to have

their old bottles refilled with a favorite wine.

“They’d even come in with old Evian bottles to fill them up at grocery stores,” recalls Bumgarner.

He was far from establishing his own winery, but that vision stuck with him, and today it fits right in with his philosophy to own and operate a business that is sustainable and locally oriented. The couple use the bottle exchange more for wines meant to be consumed in their youth rather than laid down for indefinite aging.

The return rate for the reusable bottles is running around 50 percent, Bumgarner said. The rest just may not have been exchanged yet ... or they’re doing duty as hummingbird feeder, tiki torch or something else.

Bumgarner wines in more traditional bottles are marketed as “Five Fingers” releases and include an earthy and oaky 2008 Tempranillo, a floral and fruity 2008 Petite Sirah, and an herbal 2008 Cabernet Sauvignon (recently sold out). The name “Five Fingers” and the handprint on the bottle are intended to convey the message that his wines are “personal” and “handcrafted,” Bumgarner said.

The newest and most impressive wine in that section of the couple’s portfolio is the Bumgarner Winery 2010 El Dorado Five Fingers Touriga, tantalizingly suggestive of musk in aroma, lush with red fruits in flavor, and pleasantly enduring in the finish.

It’s a husky wine, with sweetness from both fruit and oak, and firmness to its spine. Tannins aren’t so pronounced that they will interfere with the fruit when the wine is paired with a dish with appropriate mass, such as a rib-eye steak or a robust chili.

“Touriga” is the broad name for a family of black Portuguese wine grapes that include touriga nacional, touriga franca and

touriga macho. In Portugal, they are used mostly for port, though some of the harvest also ends up as dry table wines. Wine-label regulations in the United States recognize only "touriga," with no differentiation for the various strains.

Bumgarner came by the grapes that produced the touriga as he searched for fruit with which to make a dessert wine styled on port. That quest took him to Andrew and Elizabeth Standeven's Shaker Ridge Vineyard at Shingle Springs. There, he got the Portuguese varieties he wanted, and also picked up a couple of extra tons of touriga nacional with which to make the dry table wine.

The grapes were harvested at a relatively low sugar level by Sierra foothill standards, but Bumgarner was convinced that they were ripe enough to yield the lively table wine he envisioned. He was so pleased with the result that he sees touriga playing a bigger role for his brand, and toward that end bought even more of the grapes from the 2012 harvest.

(Because 2011 was an even more challenging growing year than 2010, he didn't get any touriga nacional.)

Bumgarner makes his wines at Fenton Herriott Vineyards in Placerville, but the couple pour the wine in a small converted horse barn just off Highway 50 at Camino in the heart of the Apple Hill district.

An adobe pizza oven built by Placerville earthworks craftsman Brian Evan Baker is just outside, while inside Nicole Berry oversees tastings with a knowledge of the wines and with a poetic interpretation of their impact refreshing for the trade.

Bumgarner also was a craftsman before getting into the wine business. He was studying music and building guitars in Sacramento before the commute from El Dorado County got to him and he began to look for work closer to home.

Thus in 1993 he began an 11-year stint with Boeger Winery in Apple Hill, where he worked the tasting room, the bottling line, the lab and just about every other corner of the business, learning the trade and eventually moving on to Primus Winery, also on Apple Hill, as winemaker.

In 2005, he launched his own eponymous brand by buying and processing 3 tons of Cabernet sauvignon, the variety that most intrigues him, despite its uneven history in the Gold Country. While at Boeger, he'd tasted some of the winery's Cabernet Sauvignons from the 1980s, found them "amazing," and remains enthusiastic about the varietal's potential in El Dorado County, though he's expanded his portfolio to include several other local varieties including touriga.

Bumgarner, incidentally, isn't knowingly related to San Francisco Giants pitcher Madison Bumgarner, though he speculates they may be distant cousins. Many of Madison Bumgarner's fans about the country have found Bumgarner Winery, however, as they do online searches about the pitcher. The Giants' Bumgarner hasn't yet visited the winery. Brian Bumgarner hopes he does someday, and brings along an autographed jersey.

The winemaking Bumgarner will be waiting for him, with a Silver Fork wine in a reusable bottle in hand, ensuring his return.