

THE TRIBUNE

Wine Notes: Winds of change and the fortitude to endure

By Janis Switzer
The Tribune

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once said, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger."

Scott and Bobbi Steizle can attest to that statement. Their quest to establish a vineyard, winery, and bed and breakfast has taken six years and counting, and has been fraught with challenges every step along the way.

Their experience had been so difficult that they decided to name their new wine "Fortitude," only to face off with industry giant Foster's Group Ltd. for the right to use the name. "They knew we were already using it," Scott explains, "but they just said, 'We're huge, and we'll roll over you.'" At that point, Scott recalls, "I just rolled over."

The Steizles' story starts about seven years ago when the Arizona couple was passing through Templeton and stopped to do some wine tasting. Scott had a business in Phoenix at the time, making custom doors and architectural ironwork for high-end homes and country clubs.

That trip sparked the idea of having what they called a "weekend place in wine country." A short time later they returned to Templeton and found a 10-acre property at the end of Tablas Creek Road, just a stone's throw from the well-known Turley and Pesenti vineyards.

"We bought it instantly once we saw it," Scott said. It didn't take long for them to reconsider their "weekend place." A few months later, burned out on the big-city congestion and fast pace found in Phoenix, they decided to change careers and pursue a full-time life in wine country.

"I found a couple people here and was really attracted to the concept of how they were living," said Scott, 40. But like many who have dreams of living and working among the vines, the Steizles discovered that reality often clashes head-on with the dream.

A change in store

It took three years of planning and approvals before the couple could break ground. As an experienced tradesman in the construction industry, Scott acted as general contractor in building their 9,800-square-foot home, which also includes a three-room bed and breakfast as well as a temporary tasting room for the winery.

The bed-and-breakfast concept wasn't a part of their initial plans, Scott explained, but "then the house cost so much, it took so long and things were always over budget, so we're doing this (the bed-and-breakfast) for survival."

Looking at the bright side, Scott now says "because we delayed so much, we ended up with a much better project than we originally set out to do."

"By the time we were ready to move in, the vineyard was almost completely mature," he added.

Another setback

It all seemed to be coming together for them — their 2004 vintage was just released, the 2005 was ready to go in the bottle, and their house was finally completed — when they received the phone call from Foster's that they would have to change their brand name. "When we initially pulled the copyright on the name, we discovered Beringer had reserved the name five years ago but had never used it," Scott explains. The right to use the name had legally expired at that point, so the Steizles claimed it for themselves. But less than a year later, Beringer was bought out by Foster's

Group Ltd., and among Foster's holdings was Etude Winery. Etude liked the name Fortitude for a line of its wines and started using it.

Lawyers told the Steizles that they could fight it in court, and probably win in the end, but it would cost more than \$250,000 in legal fees, and it would prohibit them from selling any of their wine in the meantime.

"I don't think we had any choice," Bobbi says of their decision to drop the name and start over. "What bothered me was that there wasn't another winery named 'Fortitude;' it was Etude Winery releasing one wine they were calling 'Fortitude,'" she said.

A new name, fresh start

Forced to come up with a new moniker, the couple was inspired by the windy nature of their property, where summer afternoon temperatures can plummet from 95 to 75 in as little as half an hour. Their new name will be "Venteux," (pronounced ventoo) the French word for "windy."

The name change requires the Steizles to re-label the 250-300 cases that already bear the Fortitude name. They haven't figured out how they're actually going to accomplish that by Jan. 1, but they are hoping friends will pitch in.

After all these trials and tribulations, the couple remains optimistic. The house is done, and the new winery is under construction and expected to be completed by next fall.

"My real goal is by harvest time next year to have everything done," Scott says. He is looking forward "to just focus on winemaking — no more construction, no more planning meetings, just 100 percent growing grapes and making wine."



Venteux Winery
Owners: Scott and Bobbi Steizle
Address: 1795 Las Tablas Road,
Templeton
Telephone: 610-9293
Tasting room hours:
Open by appointment only
Bed and breakfast:
Scheduled to open Jan. 15
Cases produced:
400 in 2005, 600 in 2006
Varietals: Cabernet sauvignon,
syrah, petit syrah; these wines
are only available at the tasting
room.

