

Benziger Family Winery: Vineyard brings family westward

By **JULIA HOLLISTER**
For the Capital Press

GLEN ELLEN, Calif. — The Benziger Family Winery has a delicious mission statement of three items: family, great wine and healthy vineyards.

“We moved out to California from upstate New York in the late 1970s when my oldest brother, Mike Benziger, found a remarkable property in Sonoma Valley,” said Chris Benziger. “Over the next five years, the entire family moved from the East Coast to Sonoma. We had 29 Benzigers living on the ranch in the 1980s.”

The Benziger family moved to pursue their shared dream of becoming winemakers.

At its height, 16 family members worked full-time in the business and five family members worked in



Chris Benziger, of Benziger Family Winery in Sonoma County, Calif., walks the rows of grapes with his dog Blue.

winemaking.

The home ranch has 35 acres of grapes and five other vineyards add 230 acres of grapes.

Sheep, cows, insects and birds have jobs, too. The sheep replace the need for

mowing; they also aerate the soil while continuously depositing nutrient-rich fertilizer in the vineyards.

A small herd of Scottish Highland cattle provides organic manure to the vineyard, and the birds help pol-

linate the garden. Benziger also grows plants that attract beneficial insects that kill others that are harmful to the vineyards.

On the home ranch grow nine varietals: the Bordeaux five (Cabernet Sauvignon,

Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Petit Verdot and Malbec), Sauvignon blanc, petit Sirah, Zinfandel and Grenache.

Benziger also grows Pinot and Chardonnay in the other vineyards. The ongoing drought has produced some unexpected results in the vineyards — smaller yields but more intense flavors.

“We are lucky because over 30 years of biodynamic farming has allowed the roots to go very deep and find their own sources of moisture,” Chris said. “The vines for the most part are self-sufficient.” He described biodynamic as “a very high level of organic farming.”

Sauvignon blanc is the most popular wine in the tasting rooms, Pinot rose is second and Cabernet is third on the list of favorites.

Benziger Winery and the industry as a whole have

faced many challenges in the last five years. Climate change, water, smoke, COVID and changing drinking habits head the list.

“We have seen many challenges in our 40-plus years of growing grapes and making wine, but the last five years have been the most extreme with multi-large fires affecting harvest, persistent drought and a worldwide pandemic,” Benziger said.

“In addition,” he said, “the wine industry is seeing its first real decline in drinkers.”

Such challenges leave him undeterred.

“Despite all the gathering storm clouds, the wine business continues to be an amazing and rewarding enterprise,” he said. “I cannot think of a better line of work. I strongly encourage our younger generations to join in.”

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