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Amateur Winemakers Featured at VOM Vintage Festival

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The Valley of the Moon Vintage Festival is just around the corner, and one of the premier wine-related happenings will be the Amateur Wine Maker Competition and awards presentation. The winners will be recognized and awarded on Sunday, September 25th in the Plaza. The presentation will be made in the Grinstead Amphitheater at 3p.m., which is a part of the Vintage Festival festivities.

One aspect of home winemaking that really surprised me was that it has always been legal, even during prohibition! In fact, the law still allows any residence to produce 200 gallons of wine per year, which makes 84 cases! Home winemakers aren't allowed to sell their wine, however.

Home winemaking is serious stuff in the Valley of the Moon. And why shouldn't it be, since pretty much all of us have a real winemaker somewhere on our block, who could become a free consultant if need be. There are obviously excellent grapes, and pre-fab home winemaking kits are available through sources like Napa Fermentation for as little as \$79.

The Valley of the Moon Dilettante Enological Society (VOMDES) is the local home winemaking club. They host the annual Amateur Wine Maker Competition presented by David Pang Dentistry. They invited me to participate in this year's judging. The competition has been a part of the Valley of the Moon Vintage Festival since 1998. They meet on the second Thursday of each month at the Vintage House at 7:30 p.m. The judges were all local winemakers, and one journalist—me! The competition was held last Thursday at the Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn. Sixty-four Sonoma County homemade wines went before a panel of 20 judges. The wines were all tasted blind, and each was judged on the following criteria: clarity and appearance, color, aroma and bouquet, acidity, sweetness, body and texture, taste and flavor, bitterness, finish and overall quality.

The overall winner and best-of-show red wine was the 2003 Caliente Ridge Syrah, Sonoma Valley. This wine was made by Michael Carroll and Fred Ewing. It shows lots of dark, dense fruit, with blackberry, strawberry and oak dominating the mid-palate.

There was plenty of interesting spice on the finish, and I thought that this was the most dimensional wine of the competition. It was also my choice for overall winner. "We've been working very hard to create a small vineyard in Agua Caliente," said an elated Carroll.

"This is our first award from that effort and we are extremely pleased." The best-of-show white wine was the 2003 Val du Penseé Chardonnay, Brown Vineyard, Sonoma Valley. This wine displayed a sizable helping of oak on the nose, followed by rich, vibrant tropical elements like banana, pineapple and vanilla. The fruit was huge here, and the mouthfeel was quite rich. It had a long, interesting finish. The fruit stood up to the oak, making this a huge Chardonnay. "A good wine is always a cooperative effort," a delighted Vicki Scharnikow (the winemaker) told the Sonoma Valley Sun.

"In this case, it's the grapes and the winemaking tutelage of Dr. Brown that made this wine special, along with help from friends and my husband Jim." All of the



wines in the competition were pretty solid across the board. I expected a few dogs, but there really weren't any.

The winning wines will be proudly poured at the VOMDES table at Founder's Night for the Vintage Festival (September 23rd). This will be our only chance for Sonomans to try these wines, since they aren't commercially available.

Be sure to stop by and taste these amateur local gems.