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## Powerful Percherons promote wine label

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*Agriculture*

We know about body, bouquet and finish as wine characteristics, but an Upper Lake couple is adding a new wine dynamic — horsepower. It's a real stable element.

Husband and wife team Glenn Benjamin and Dana DiRicco grow wine grapes on 30 acres of their 110-acre farm in Lake County with substantial help from their 12 Percheron draft horses. Ironically, the 2,000-pound animals are involved in almost every viticultural phase except crushing.

On some of the ranch that is not in vineyard Benjamin and DiRicco grow 45 acres of alfalfa and oat hay for feed. The horses pull cultivation, seeding and harvesting equipment to earn part of their rations. They munch on the native field grass cover crop between the vineyard rows in the fall and winter, but are confined to other quarters when tender young spring growth appears on the vines.

By next year the enterprising couple expects to produce enough hay to satisfy the horses' appetites entirely, but is sparingly supplementing until that happens.

They show the black and dappled gray horses at major draft horse events in the western United States. They hope to collect as many ribbons and awards for their wine as for the horses.

Benjamin, a practicing large-animal veterinarian with a degree from Cornell, has been the staff veterinarian at the Safari West exotic animal farm in Santa Rosa for 18 years. Among his patients are zebras, rhinos, cheetahs, giraffes and water buffalo.

For the 27 acres of Sauvignon Blanc grapes and the 3 acres of Port vines, DiRicco has developed a network of connections to realize the full marketability of the grapes.

In only two years their certification as organic growers, relying heavily on horse manure as fertilizer, is scheduled to occur June 22. They followed the advice of well known vineyard manager and organic grower Jim Fetzer, and expect the designation to add a premium to their wines.

DiRicco and Benjamin have chosen Dave Downey as their vineyard manager. From Ukiah, Downey manages several organic vineyards in Lake County and neighboring Mendocino County. Until he was retained they were mentored by Peter Chevalier, who is part of a well known North Coast wine family.

Crushing and bottling takes place at the Atascadero Creek winery in Sebastopol. The label on their wines is DiRicco, produced in their Elk Mountain Vineyards.

Some heartbreak accompanied their first harvest season as crops were reduced in nearly all of the Lake County district by a freeze. But their location was their best defense. A normal crop would have been about 150 tons, so they were pleased with 100 tons from a second crop, a better yield than most of their neighbors.

Fellow members of the Lake County Winegrowers Association have enjoyed seeing Benjamin and DiRicco's vineyard from the seat of a wagon drawn by the Percherons. The wagon has been hitched

up for others as well, and horse-guided vineyard tours might become regular occasions for neighbors, friends and tourists.

The 4,500-square-foot house that came with the property offers a comfortable meeting area for wine friends as well as relatives or associates who drop in.

Comfort is an apt description for the entire 110-acre spread. You hope that farmers elsewhere can find a share of that comfort, even if it takes horsepower to achieve it. And the possibility is always present that Percherons can do for wine what the Clydesdales have done for beer.

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