

Heartbreak Beaujolais

Laura Sanders' vineyard

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The rolling hills of Napa Valley. The sun-kissed Tuscan countryside. The corner of Daniel and Hiscock? Well... Laura Sander's west-side vineyard will probably never be classed among the winemaking elite. But it has given her friends and neighbors a chance to try their hands as amateur vintners.

When she bought the property in 1997, Sanders was faced with a unique dilemma. The previous owners, an Italian family with a love of homemade wine, had dedicated the hillside beside the house to grape cultivation. "They planted the vineyard about 85 years ago, and whoever did it must've had knowledge," Sanders says. "This is a perfect area for grapes." She soon found out how perfect: the vineyard produces 10 to 40 bushels of Concord grapes a year. "That first fall I thought to myself, *what* am I going to do with all these grapes?"

In spite of occasional visits from hungry homeless people, most of the fruit was going to waste. So around the time of the autumn equinox, Sanders hosted her first winemaking party. She invited friends to help pick and clean the grapes, then stomp them in plastic kiddie pools to extract the juice—or maybe just for the fun of it. The party was a hit, and has since become an annual tradition. "We put flyers all around," Sanders says, "everyone's invited. People can take home as many grapes as they like."

Drawn by the communal spirit and the lure of free grapes, in September my wife and I brave a rainy afternoon and head over to Sanders' party. She greets us wearing a turquoise cowboy hat, matching socks, and a big smile.

"Generally this place is swarming," she says, gesturing to the rows of grapevines and the lawns surrounding them, "but because of the rain..." Still, there's a small group seated behind her in the garage, each with a bucket full of grapes between their knees. As they chat, they leisurely pluck off stems and throw the grapes into another bucket.

"Like I told you, we let people take the grapes home with them," Sanders says, "but there's one condition. They have to come back the next year to share whatever products they make." She sweeps her hand across the table. "The jelly, the juice, this wine, that wine – anything sitting on this table was made from these grapes. Each year, we all get in a circle and vote for the things we like best. It's kind of like St. Julian's, you know? Like wine tastings? It's fun."

Sanders fills paper cups with a cloudy reddish brown liquid. “This is last year’s,” she explains, as we eye it skeptically. “It’s called Heartbreak Beaujolais.” She points to the label, which looks like it was colored with magic marker. “We always try to name the bottles after something personal. This one over here is called Honeymoon Rosé. When George Bush became president, we bottled some and called it “Non-Election Day Wine.”

Sampling my portion, I’m overwhelmed with gratitude at the smallness of the cup. Sanders looks at my face and laughs. “People can dump their wine,” she assures us. “You don’t have to drink it. There’s no suffering allowed.

“The thing about Concord grapes is, they don’t make good wine,” she explains. “They’re used for jellies and jams and communion wine and the sweet stuff kids drink when they’re 17. But we keep trying. One year we tried to make champagne.” She rolls her eyes. “I was having a dinner party and we wanted a drink, so I picked out a bottle. But when I took the little wire off... It could’ve taken my eye out! It could’ve killed me! This cork went flying and the entire bottle sprayed out. Wine went all over the ceiling and rained down over everything, all over my guests, all over the table. I mean, everybody had to take off their clothes and put them in the wash. It was hysterical!”

As we sample bottle after bottle, the flavor seems to gradually improve. “This would be good on a salad,” one guest muses, as she drains a rather vinegary vintage. But Sanders is looking down, puzzled. She pulls out a dusty bottle and eyes it curiously. “This is a renegade bottle of wine, there’s absolutely no information on it. Oh, here’s the name – Dead Red! You know why? Because this was bottled very close to the Day of the Dead, in 2003.

“Everybody needs to try this!” she announces, and pours it into our little cups. “Here comes Dead Red, from the ’03 vineyard, and I have no idea how it’s gonna taste...”

We all drink, and the room goes silent. Then everyone starts to smile. “This one’s not bad!” someone declares, sounding more than a little astonished. Sanders laughs. “Well, it’s been sitting there for almost three years, maybe it just needed to age.”

As we prepare to take our leave. Sanders presses a bottle into my hands. “Here, take a bottle of Bloody Solstice Red. Don’t feel bad if you have to mix it with something good!” But as we meander to our car, that no longer seems necessary. Thanks to the drinks--or the friendly company--the pungent aftertaste of Ann Arbor vintage has given way to a lingering sweetness. It may not be Bordeaux, but it’s home.