

Acampo farmer turns to winemaking, drawing on years of experience

By [Marc Lutz](#)

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He's been an elementary school teacher. He's been a farmer. And now, Tom Hoffman has added the title of winemaker to his resumé.

In a trend that seems to be more and more common, Hoffman is the latest vineyard farmer to open a winery. Heritage Oak Winery in Acampo officialy opened in December and has three of its wine available for purchase.

Hoffman and his wife, Carmela, live in a picturesque farmhouse surrounded by rolling vineyards and bordered by venerable oak trees along the Mokelumne River. The home was originally built by Hoffman's great-grandparents back in 1913 on land that has been in the family since the 1860s.

In the five generations that Hoffman's family has farmed the land, there have been wheat fields, cherry orchards, peach orchards, Tokay grapes and even hogs. It wasn't until after Hoffman became the vineyard manager in 1982 that the land began to be used for Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay grapes.

As selling the grape harvests became less lucrative, Hoffman joined the ranks of other area farmers like the Mettlers, Langes and Holdeners to try his hand at winemaking.

"I felt we had to start making wines to survive," Hoffman said. His ultimate goal is for the winery to be profitable enough to eventually support the vineyards.

Hoffman believes in his wines, but it's the winery that he believes will give the business its edge.

Visitors to the winery, which is open seven days a week, can have a taste of what Heritage Oak offers, buy a bottle if they like, then take a leisurely walk down a 2 1/2 mile trail to the Mokelumne river. The path winds among the vineyards and oak trees and eventually ends at the river, where the winery has placed picnic tables for those who want to have lunch and watch the cool water roll by.

It's Hoffman's plan to welcome those out for an afternoon of boating.

"We're going to put a sign by the river," Hoffman said. The winery is located halfway between the fish hatchery and Lodi Lake, and he believes a stop at Heritage Oak would be a nice break in river activities.

Even though Hoffman is comfortable making wines, having been an amateur winemaker for years, there are challenges when it comes to getting into the vino game.

The first of many challenges was getting the tasting room built. Hoffman admits a lot of tension came from planning, permits and completing construction on the tasting room and barrel storage.

The finished tasting room is an inviting place of rich wood-paneled walls, polished granite counter tops and multiple shelves filled with Heritage Oak wines.

Marketing the label has been another challenge. Although every winery offers a unique product, it may not always be seen that way by the retailers and restaurants being approached.

"Getting out into stores is tough. There's lots of competition," Hoffman said. "I'll go into a restaurant or store and they'll say, 'not another Lodi winery.'"

The wines offered through Heritage Oak range from \$13 a bottle to \$17 a bottle. Currently, they are selling their 2007 Sauvignon Blanc, 2006 Zinfidelity and 2006 Vino Tinto. However they will also be offering a 2006 Estate Grown Zin and 2006 Bartlam Zin.

With Carmela and his mother, Joanne Hoffman, Tom Hoffman is ready to face the challenges and rewards of running his own winery.

"Ignorance never stopped me before," he said with a grin.

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