

the winemaker's art



Crushpad is a San Francisco custom-crush facility that makes wine for some 2,000 commercial and private clients. Acquiring grapes from West Coast vineyards such as Doctor's, Coombsville, and Stagecoach, Crushpad provides aspiring winemakers either a hands-on or a long-distance opportunity to be involved in wine production. From selecting varietals and vineyards to participating in crush and fermentation to creating a label, each client works with a Crushpad consulting winemaker to produce 25 cases of a customized wine. Cindy Cosco has been Crushpad's lab manager for two years. Following a 15-year career in law enforcement, she moved to Sonoma, Calif., in 2004 to work as a wine chemist for Chateau St. Jean. She's also progressing toward an enology degree at Napa Valley College. After joining Crushpad, Cosco decided to launch her own brand, Passaggio ("passageway" in Italian), initially releasing an unoaked Chardonnay.

Sommelier Journal asked Cindy Cosco, "How did you get started as a winemaker at Crushpad?"

In May 2007, I attended an open house at Crushpad. I loved the concept of making my own wine without the large investment in equipment and facilities usually needed to launch a wine label. At the open house, I met Michael Zitzlaff, Crushpad's chief winemaker, who was looking for a lab manager. A few months later, I was running the lab. I was in the right place at the right time.

I fell in love with winemaking as a young girl growing up in West Virginia, listening to my grandfather regale the family with stories of making wine in the basement during Prohibition. When I came to the Bay Area, I participated in several crushes at Chateau St. Jean; at Crushpad, I've overseen the fermentation and aging of thousands of barrels. But in 2007, the grapes being crushed would mark the inaugural vintage of my very own label, Passaggio Chardonnay.

I'm not a fan of the typical California Chardonnay; I find most are too buttery and too oaky. I wanted Passaggio to be clean, light, and crisp, with more of an Italian profile. After the grapes, acquired from Split Rock Vineyard in Sonoma, were harvested in October 2007, I fermented them at cold temperatures in stainless-steel tanks, instead of oak barrels. I also prevented malolactic conversion. The resulting palate offers peach, apricot, and soft melon notes, with hints of lemon zest, firm acidity, balanced weight, and a lengthy finish.

Because Passaggio's tagline is "New Generation," I also wanted the package to be different from the norm. So rather than going with the conventional cork and capsule, I chose the ZORK closure—a reinsertable plunger that "pops" like a cork when extracted. I love its ease of use and the fact that it eliminates cork taint. Plus, it's recyclable and costs less than a cork and capsule.

In addition to my duties at Crushpad, I market Passaggio, which is currently sold at the Ferry Plaza Wine Merchant in San Francisco, Oxbow Wine Merchant in Napa, the Valley Wine Shack in Sonoma, and The Corner wine bar in San Francisco's Mission district. I've been thrilled with the reception. Since the release of 50 cases in August 2008, I have only seven cases remaining. This year, I plan to release 125 cases of Passaggio Chardonnay, as well as a Pinot Noir.

I think people have been clamoring for a change. Because Passaggio is reasonably priced, handcrafted, and so distinctively unoaky, who knows? Maybe my approach will set a new trend. Maybe it will also inspire others to follow their dreams and passions.

CINDY COSCO
Lab Manager
Crushpad, Inc.
2573 Third St.
San Francisco, CA 94107
(877) 946-3404
www.crushpadwine.com
www.passaggiowines.com

Photo by Kelly Fooy