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New winery joins an urban revolution

By Terri Hardy - Bee Staff Writer

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Jason Fernandez, who coowns Revolution Wines, moves barrels of wine at his midtown site near 21st and P streets. Revolution Wines is the first full-production winery to operate in the city of Sacramento since Prohibition. Sacramento Bee/Hector Amezcua

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Jason Fernandez, winemaker and co-owner of Revolution Wines, steps out of his company's concrete brick headquarters and surveys his domain: "sweeping" views of an alley, the back of a day spa and a parking lot, shoehorned behind a hair salon in a corner of Sacramento's midtown.

No rolling hills with vines here.

Fernandez, 33, said that doesn't really matter, not when wine's the thing and not, he hopes, when customers taste his product.



"I've come to terms that I'm a crappy musician; there's a lot of things I can't do," Fernandez said. "But making wine, that's my gift. And here we are, in the middle of a large labor pool, in the middle of lots of customers."

Fernandez and his partners are the latest innovators in the burgeoning "urban winery" trend in California and Washington state that have allowed people to craft wine without setting up shop in an ultra-expensive facility in the middle of a vineyard.

Revolution Wines, at 2116 P St., opens today, becoming the first full-production winery to operate within city boundaries since Prohibition.

They'll truck in grapes, but do the crushing and fermenting on site. At the tasting area, Revolution's three 2005 wines will be poured Tuesdays through Saturdays: a pinot grigio, a proprietary red blend that uses the obscure Montepulciano grape, and a zinfandel that won a gold medal at the California State Fair.

"Sure, the whole winery in the vines is kind of romantic, but personally I'm drawn to the urban wineries," said Jay Selman, a self-described wine geek and producer for the popular "Grape Radio," an online podcast about wine. The urban winery trend has been a topic on the show.

"You can talk to the winemakers there, instead of some anonymous person in a tasting room," Selman said. "For wine geeks, it's a tremendous advantage to ask a winemaker why they're doing what they're doing."

Small, cost-efficient boutique wineries set in urban centers, most notably in the Bay Area, have been operating for years. Now, it's Sacramento's turn, said David Spaur, city economic development director.

Moving the operations away from the grapes has often turned out to be a solid business decision, he said.

"People walking around town see the name. Then they walk into a restaurant or a wine shop and there's instant recognition," Spaur said. "They already have fans."

Revolution's 2005 vintage is now for sale, offered at the winery and a few upscale eateries and gourmet haunts, including Mason's restaurant, Taylor's Market and Beyond Napa Wine Merchants.

The winery could spur more local boutique wines, Spaur said, by becoming a "custom crusher" that will allow small vintners to use its facilities.

The Revolution operation also is being viewed as a way to underscore the Sacramento region as a wine destination and to complement the city's burgeoning wine bar scene, city officials said.

"Remember a few years ago when cigar rooms were the hot thing? Wine tasting is what's cool now," said Michael Testa, the Sacramento Convention and Visitors Bureau's vice president of communications and public affairs.

On any given night, Testa said, the city's new wine bars, including 58 Degrees & Holding, the Grand and the L Wine Lounge, are crowded with a young, hip clientele that's brought vitality to downtown. There are discussions about opening a tasting room that will feature Renwood and Santino wines (whose winery is in Amador County) in the former Avid Reader bookstore at 10th and L streets.

At P Street, the Revolution crew is still scrambling. Tanks and other equipment are on the way from Italy, so the functioning

winery has yet to be totally assembled. Fermenting and cased wine are on site, cooled by portable air conditioners, until crews are able to upgrade the electrical system for central air.

Rod Farley, owner of the Beyond Napa Wine Merchants shop and tasting bar, said Revolution is making "wines that are very well made and a good value."

With prices at \$13.95 to \$19.95 a bottle, Farley said, they are targeting the "Whole Foods crowd" or, "upwardly mobile, a bit trendy, younger -- not the cabernet collectors."

Despite his age, Fernandez is an experienced winemaker who has worked at several wineries, including Bonny Doon, Chalone and R.H. Phillips.

He said he's not averse to taking chances, and his philosophy is to "make wines from grapes grown in the right area -- you'll never get the flavor you want if you don't."

Grapes for his pinot grigio come from Clarksburg. The zinfandel grapes are "handcrafted" by a small grower, a 70-year-old former botany instructor who prunes the vines himself.

And although Montepulciano grapes aren't often seen outside of Tuscan wines, Fernandez said his Yolo County-grown grapes work in his Renzo red varietal.

Fernandez said he makes wines to enjoy immediately.

"I've seen wineries that sell flawed wines tell their customers it just needs to age a few more years -- they're lying," Fernandez said. "So drink my wines now -- I'll make some more."

Revolution is a partnership of family and friends who've invested lots of time, sweat and about \$250,000 to get the winery up and running. Besides Fernandez, Gina and Joe Genshlea Jr. will play active roles in the operations. Other investors include Joe Genshlea Sr., a prominent Sacramento attorney, and Phil Serna, a lobbyist and son of the late Sacramento Mayor Joe Serna Jr.

Under Fernandez's supervision, the 2005 and 2006 vintages were made and stored in area wineries. Early this year, the partnership discovered the P Street warehouse -- a car repair shop and stained glass studio in previous incarnations.

If things go well, Fernandez said he hopes operations will spread to the brick building at 2114 P St., now housing a hair salon that isn't planning to renew its lease.

At least five other wineries, including Eagle, Pioneer and California wineries, once operated in the same few blocks, said Joe Genshlea Jr.

"Most wineries used to be in cities," Genshlea said. "We're coming full circle."

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