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Wines aged in local history

By Laurie Jervis/Wine Country

Mike and Brooke Carhartt are living proof that bigger isn't always better.

The couple, the owners/winemakers for the Carhartt label, pour their six wines from a Los Olivos tasting room that's just 99 square feet in size. The duo have produced nine vintages since their first planting in 1996, growing steadily from production of just a few hundred cases to more than 2,000 in recent years. And since the tiny tasting room opened nine months ago, "we've met or exceeded our target," in sales, Mike Carhartt said. The steady growth has been mostly word of mouth, he said. "It's been the people who have given us the track record."

On a recent, blustery Thursday afternoon, Carhartt poured his wines for seven eager tasters gathered in the facility. Tasting rooms that regularly feature the winemaker behind the bar are rare, and Carhartt expertly fielded questions about his wines. Carhartt also brings local history to his winemaking: He grew up on his family's 2,000-acre cattle ranch that stretched all the way from Alamo Pintado Road to Ballard Canyon Road, he said. In fact, in 1964, Carhartt lived in what now is Lincourt Vineyard's tasting room; it was part of the original family ranch, he said. "I'm now farming the same ranch I grew up on," he smiled.

And yes, Mike is a descendant of the family that founded the famous Carhartt boots and outerwear company. "My great-grandfather founded the company in the 1880s, and my grandfather sold it in the 1940s to the current owners, based out of Dearborn, Mich. "It's great name recognition," he said, adding that the Michigan owners "have ordered our wines."

Carhartt spent 20 years working in the insurance industry, working out of the Santa Maria office of a big company, he said. In 1993, Brooke and Mike bought back the land from his father's estate, and now grow their grapes on 10 of the ranch's 50 acres. Their winery is located in an old barn on the ranch property, which is named Rancho Santa Ynez. After planting vineyards, for the first two years the Carhartts only sold their crops to other winemakers. Foxen and Byron were two customers, and Carhartt credits Foxen's Bill Wathen (co-owner with Richard Dore) of planting the seed to create the Carhartt label. "Bill encouraged us to make the wine ourselves," Carhartt said. Another longtime winemaker, Ken Brown, was also instrumental to the couple in their early years, Carhartt said. Bill Kesselring, agricultural and vineyard consultant, Carhartt also said has been a big help to the winemaking couple from a viticultural standpoint. "He's been a great source of expertise," Carhartt said. "That's the beauty of the industry. Everyone has always been so helpful to us. Winemaking is unlike any other industry I've known in that way," he emphasized.

Today, the Carhartts grow 5 acres each of syrah and merlot grapes on their ranch. In addition, they produce a "Chase the Blues Away" rosé. In 2005, the couple added to their lineup a sauvignon blanc with grapes from Faith Vineyard; the 2006 vintage comprises both Faith and Westerly Vineyards, Carhartt said. The 5 original acres of syrah are farmed in five different syrah clones, Carhartt noted with some excitement: "It's really fun, that cloning." Due partly to the ranch's high exposure, the Carhartt vineyard will never be a high-yield producer, he said. But that's OK with him, "because 90 percent of the wine's flavor comes from the (quality of the) vineyard," Carhartt said, citing the strength of his popular merlot grapes. Carhartt's pinot noir comes from Foley Vineyard's Santa Rita Hills crop, and its Zinfandel from Westside Vineyards in Paso Robles, he said.

Brooke and Mike's son, Chase, who turns 18 next week, may continue the Carhartt winemaking tradition; he starts in the viticulture program at Cal Poly this fall, Carhartt said. "Our family's operation gives Chase a chance to stay in this area, and an opportunity to make wine, if he decides to take it," Carhartt said.