



WINEMAKER PROFILE:

Todd Williams of Toad Hollow Vineyards

by Millie Howie

“I’m not a winemaker,” protests Todd Williams, president of Toad Hollow Vineyards. “I’m a ‘tinker,’ the guy who drives the truck, sweeps the floor, signs the checks. I have a great consulting winemaker, Ray Coursen and all our wine is custom crushed, overseen by Rick Sayre.”

One thing Todd did not list, but certainly is something that is evident in his attitude, his wine labels, and his approach to selling is that he is a guy who likes to have fun. In this his partner-in-wine, Rod Strong, is in 100% agreement. But that comes later in the story of Todd’s progress from his first career as a saloon owner/operator to his involvement in creating and selling 100,000 cases of California wine a year plus another 60,000 made in France.

He was raised in Versailles, Kentucky, in spectacularly beautiful horse country, but the bucolic life, he knew, was not for him. He left

Kentucky after his high school graduation, joined the Air Force, and wound up in Oklahoma where he established his first saloon, known as the Pink Elephant Club. Then followed a parade of 17 other taverns, nightclubs and restaurants until his final venture, Whiskey River Inn located in Arnold California, where he and his wife Francine (Frankie) lost everything, then began the long climb back up.

“In July 1988, I took a sales job at Whitehall Lane Winery, my introduction to the wine business. I moved around a bit, finally landing the position of national sales and marketing manager at Shafer Vineyards where I remained for three years before taking off again and eventually putting together my own marketing company called Hillside Estates.”

In 1993, returning from a business meeting in Boston, he and his seat mate, Rod Strong came up with the idea of combining their talents, and thus was born Toad Hollow Winery. Their first vintage was a Russian

River Valley Chardonnay entering the marketplace in May 1994.

Their irreverent, no snobbery attitude built a strong following for their wines with names such as Cacophony (Paso Robles Zinfandel), Eye of the Toad (Pinot Noir Rose) and two new ones – Concinnity (California Cabernet Sauvignon) and the very special Rod’s Pride Russian River Valley Pinot Noir Reserve, honoring wine icon Rod Strong. Add to all this Le Faux Frog Wines from Limoux France and you have about as enticing a tasting list as could be created.

You can taste the Toad Hollow wines, find out the stories behind the labels (drawn by artist Maureen Erickson) and have a thoroughly free-wheeling fun time any day from 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. at the Toad Hollow tasting room at 409A Healdsburg Avenue – a block from the historic Plaza. For more facts about the Toad Hollow fantasies go to www.toadhollow.com or call (707) 431-8667.