

# LIQUID ASSETS

## WINE IN THE SKY

BY JOHN ALONGÉ

The sun rose brightly on the frozen landscape, glinting cheerily on the frosted windowpanes. Here and there, a dusting of snow marked a peaked roofline or a pine branch. Smoke curled lazily from the chimneys of the town's quaint cottages and one by one, the shops began opening for business.

It had all the makings of another beautiful mid-winter day in Julian. The town was built in a frenetic burst of construction in 1870, shortly after cattleman Fred Coleman had discovered flecks of gold in a nearby creek. After the short-lived gold rush (San Diego County's first and only), some remained behind to settle the area. Crops were planted, animals pastured and apples came to be a local favorite.

About two miles outside of town, nestled in a small valley at the foot of Volcan Mountain, the Jenkins Winery property includes eight acres of old-growth apple orchard. The rest is planted in wine grapes – Pinot Noir and Pinot Grigio, to be exact.

Proprietors Jim and Jeanne Jenkins have established their tasting room in a rustic old apple shed at the entrance to their property. Behind it looms a brand new, all-metal winemaking facility complete with loading dock, production area, wine lab and office. There, they produce small quantities of Pinot Noir and Pinot Gri-

gio wines from their estate-grown fruit, as well as a spectacularly fragrant dry apple wine from their own apples. The Jenkins also produce a variety of other wines from grapes that they purchase from various local growers.

Jim Jenkins came to winemaking in what can certainly be deemed a circuitous way. After a bucolic childhood in southern Illinois, Jim began studies in physics at the University of Illinois. His first change of direction came when he decided to attend medical school at Duke University, then established a pediatrics practice in San Diego. During that time, his love of wine led him to take enology classes at UC Davis and to become active in the San Diego Amateur Winemaking Society.

When he retired from his medical practice after 28 years, Jim decided to establish his own winery.

"I wanted to become a winemaker so I could make wine that would let me hear a chorus of angels singing," Jim explains. "So far, I have heard one little angel humming."

Never one to do things by the book, Jim set off on his winemaking quest. He was introduced to well-established local winemaker Mike Menghini and spent time helping out around Mike's winery, picking grapes, pruning, cleaning tanks and



learning the basic workings of a small facility.

During that time, when an adjacent property went up for sale, Jim and Jeanne decided to take the plunge. They bought the 10-acre parcel with the firm intention of making it into their own eponymous winery. Five years later, after interminable setbacks and struggles with a variety of government agencies, the first bottle of wine from J. Jenkins Winery was sold on July 4, 2003. In 2007, the winery produced about 800 cases of wine.

At 4,300 feet of altitude, the Jenkins' winery is certainly among the higher vineyards in the world. A small number of wineries in Italy, Argentina, Idaho, Colorado and the Canary Islands are established in alpine settings. Most of them cultivate only the hardiest of grape varieties, due to the extreme climactic conditions that prevail at that altitude. Why then would Jim Jenkins choose to plant delicate Pinot Noir and Pinot Grigio on his property?

"I wanted to experiment and explore the limits of what those grapes could do in such a challenging environment," he says. "Remarkable things can occur when grapes are stressed and challenged. I thought the conditions could perhaps bring out some amazing qualities in the wines."

Current research indicates that there may well be yet another benefit to high-altitude grape growing. Greater ultraviolet radiation levels present at higher altitudes seem to result in greater concentrations of polyphenols in grapes, particularly red grapes, produced at altitude. There is substantial new evidence that the increased polyphenol content has a host of beneficial effects on heart health. Medicine has never tasted so good.

Jim's apple wine, labeled as *Dolcezza*, harkens back to the arrival of the first Europeans in North America. Early colonists did not have access to the kinds of grape traditionally used to make wine. Opportunistically, they would ferment almost anything that was a source of natural sugar.

Berry wines were prevalent at the time, but the abundance of native apples made them a perfect source for winemaking.



Like many of the great wines of Europe, which are blends of a multitude of grapes, apple wine benefits from the use of a variety of different apples, each kind bringing unique qualities to the final blend.

The well-established orchards on the Jenkins property are planted with 21 distinct apple varieties. Jim varies the blend from year to year to achieve the greatest expression of balance and bouquet.

"There's a great sense of history and tradition that comes with making apple wine," Jim says. "From the time it was established, Julian has been a center of apple growing. Apple pies produced here are famous and families come here in the fall to pick apples. Apple wine just seems appropriate in this environment. It expresses our *terroir*, in a sense."

It's a cool, crisp Saturday afternoon in Julian. The town is packed with folks who have come up for the day to poke around the little shops, have a bite to eat, maybe buy an apple pie to take home.

Just outside of town at the J. Jenkins Winery, about a dozen people are crowded into the little tasting room. Jeanne Jenkins is holding forth at the tasting bar, chatting and laughing with a couple from Los Angeles and a family from Point Loma. Jim is packing up a case of wine just purchased by some visitors from Arizona. Outside, in the cold mountain air, the Jenkins' little vineyard lies waiting for spring.

**J. Jenkins Winery**  
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