

WINE

Dr. Toad's wine adventure

Fun-loving owner imparts whimsy to vineyard

By MICHAEL LONSFORD
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HE'S not manic, as his half-brother Robin often is in movies. But he does have a twinkle in his eye, and he's quick with a laugh, especially if it's at his own expense. Fact is, the sometimes-goateed Todd Williams is just a down-to-earth guy who's having a ball in the wine business.

He just heeds a proverbial different drummer from you and me, that's all. But then, what do you expect from a man in his 60s who retains his childhood nickname: "Dr. Toad"?

And who owns a winery but shows up at a wine luncheon wearing a Hawaiian shirt and drinking a beer? And whose wines sport labels with silly-looking toads and a dancing badger, but whose wines are serious beverages, indeed?

(Incidentally, Todd Williams was the poolside bartender in the scene near the end of Robin Williams' film *Mrs. Doubtfire*, but in the end credits, he was listed simply as -- yep -- "Dr. Toad."

But let's go back a bit.

Dr. Toad used to run a roughhouse saloon in Altus, Okla., called the Pink Elephant. Later he got into the restaurant business and found out (a) just how much of his time it took, and (b) how much of his money it took.

So, by the late 1980s, he was selling wine for Whitehall Lane Winery in the Napa Valley.

Then in 1993, too young in his mid-50s to retire, Dr. Toad teamed up with old friend Rodney Strong to create a winery they called Toad Hollow.

Strong, a former Broadway dancer who had gotten into the California wine business in the late '50s, had just sold his eponymous winery in Sonoma County, but still owned a little chardonnay vineyard.

It was a good match. Strong would make wine, Dr. Toad would sell it.

It wasn't always easy.

But now, eight years later, they're an "overnight success," making upward of 65,000 cases of wine.

And not your cookie-cutter coterie of corks, either. How about a chardonnay that was *not* fermented in oak? How about a real rosé made from pinot noir? How about a sparkling wine called Amplexus, whose suggestive name somehow slipped by the label-approval boys in Washington. (You'll have to look it up.)

Toad Hollow makes a skein of wines, most from purchased grapes. The wines aren't expensive, but they are solid and good values. Enjoy the humor on the labels, then enjoy the wine.

Dr. Toad gets to Houston upon occasion, and hosted a luncheon at Post Oak Grill on a recent visit (his wines are distributed here by Republic Beverage). It was a very hot day, and he was starting lunch off with a beer.

"Great palate cleaner," he laughed.

First up was a glass of **Toad Hollow Amplexus** -- ★ ★ ★ ★ -- a sparkling wine made in the cremant style, meaning fewer bubbles, with a pleasant creaminess to it.

It's a nonvintage wine and will remain so. Although the BATF OK'd the label, if the wine were to become vintage, the label would have to be resubmitted for approval. That's not likely to happen. About \$17.99.

The **2000 Toad Hollow Chardonnay** -- ★ ★ ★ -- had good fruit and a pleasing acidity. "There's no oak on this wine," Dr. Toad said. "You know the buzz phrase about a wine being a 'food wine.' Well, there's nothing in this wine to compete with food."

Since this is not one of the ubiquitous California "butter bomb" chardonnays, it's not surprising it's been a success. "This is our eighth vintage," Dr. Toad said, "and we've gone from 3,000 cases to 62,000 cases." About \$13.99.

The **2000 Le Faux Frog Chardonnay** -- ★ ★ ★ -- is juice purchased from the South of France, and is surprisingly much more tropical-oriented, with ripe, almost unctuous fruit, with a touch of lemon. It seemed a bit overripe. About \$9.99.

The **1999 Le Faux Frog Merlot** -- ★ ★ ★ ½ -- is a pleasant quaff, not very complex, but it does go down very smoothly. About \$9.99.

The **1999 Le Faux "Apropos" Syrah** -- ★ ★ ★ ★ -- with its black fruit, touch of tannins and surprising complexity, is way underpriced at \$9.99. This is a terrific wine for sipping with grilled burgers and steaks.

The **1999 Toad Hollow Pinot Noir Reserve** (there is no "regular" bottling) -- ★ ★ ★ -- is a light but spot-on, "pretty" pinot with very nice spicy aromatics and flavor. This is not a heavyweight wine, but then, "it wasn't meant to be, either," Dr. Toad said. About \$22.99.

Toad Hollow also makes a very successful rosé called Eye of the Toad from pinot noir grapes (\$9.99). It's a light but downright pleasing rosé. Also in the repertoire: Cacophony Zinfandel (\$14.99) and Reserve Merlot (\$21.99).

Yes, Dr. Toad is enjoying himself these days. Gone are those grueling restaurant days: "My wife, Francine, said never again, and she meant it!" His business is a success and he's having fun. Don't believe it? Check out the Toad Hollow World Wide Webbed Site ...

Yep, Dr. Toad has his own drummer, all right. Who else would order liver and onions at one of Houston's prime steakhouses?

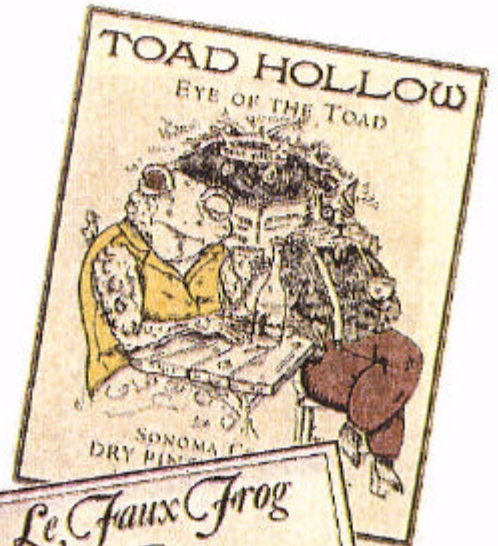
And he makes no bones of being of a certain age. "Don't forget," he said, "I grew up in the '50s and '60s, and I've always believed in LSD."

LSD, like the hallucinogenic drug?

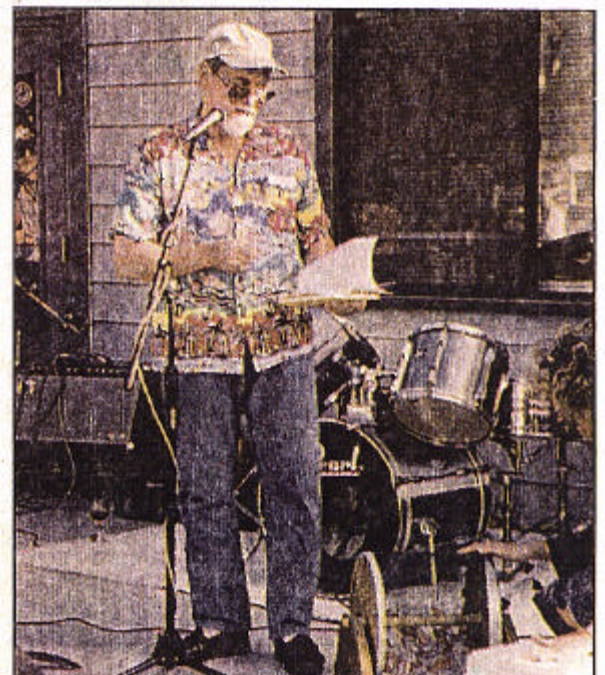
Dr. Toad laughed. "No: little self-denial!"

And that's the truth -- straight, no chaser.

Michael Lonsford's Wine of the Week appears Fridays in Dining Guide. If you don't have a quill pen, you can send an e-mail to michael.lonsford@chron.com.



Toad Hollow Winery and Le Faux Frog wine labels are always colorful and whimsical, featuring a silly-looking frog (Todd "Dr. Toad" Williams) and often a dancing badger (winemaker Rodney Strong).



Todd Williams, aka "Dr. Toad," says his wines aren't for the wine-snob set; they're for people who like to drink wine.

How wines are rated:
 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ = Outstanding
 ★ ★ ★ ★ = Fine
 ★ ★ ★ = Good
 ★ ★ = Fair
 ★ = Poor
 (★) = indicates ageability