

# Winemaking for the common throng

■ Crushpad provides winery for those who lack the capital

By Stett Holbrook  
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**B**EHIND the graffiti-tagged walls of the old Best Foods mayonnaise plant in San Francisco's Mission District, a revolution is brewing. Or maybe fermenting is a better word.

Two tech industry veterans with a serious love of wine have teamed up to create Crushpad, a first-of-its-kind business that aims to do for winemaking what the printing press did for the written word.

"We're democratizing winemaking," says Michael Brill, company president and CEO. "We're out to make as many winemakers as possible."

Massive start-up costs make opening a winery out of reach for all but the well-capitalized. Home winemakers often have to contend with mediocre grapes and mad dashes to Napa or Sonoma counties at harvest time. And home winemakers' dreams of becoming the next Robert Mondavi are limited by the space available in their garage, and their spouse's patience.

Crushpad, which bills itself as a "community winery," aims to make winemaking accessible to the public, giving aspiring and even professional winemakers the space, equipment, ingredients and expert help needed to make premium, small-batch wines, all in one place.

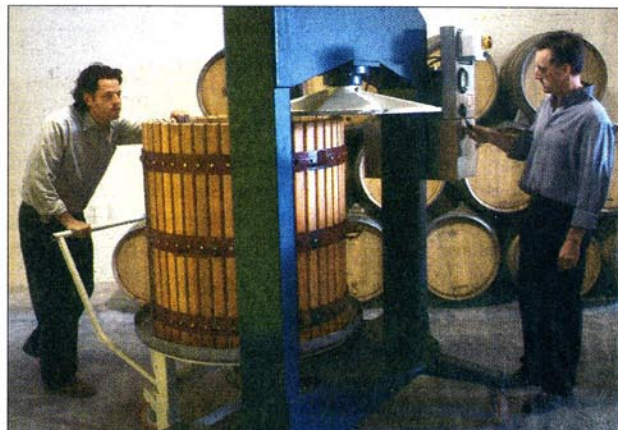
The winery is open for business and is actively signing up customers. Crushpad will start making wine from grapes from this year's crop.

Brill says Crushpad has agreements with more than 15 top grape growers and will give customers access to the state's best fruit. Then, with a winemaking plan in hand, the enophiles will work with Crushpad winemaker Tom Leaf to create the wine of their dreams.

Customers make all the decisions. What style of wine? What temperature for fermentation? Natural or cultured yeasts? Extended maceration? How long to age the wine? Crushpad will allow customers to be as involved, or uninvolved, in the winemaking process as they like.

The smallest lot size Crushpad will make is a single barrel, which yields about 25 cases of wine. But because the company removes the myriad middlemen involved in winemaking, the

Please see **WINE**, Living 2



RON LEWIS — Staff

**GRAND OPENING:** Crushpad president and CEO Michael Brill and Kevin Cooney, director of sales, prepare for the grand opening of the custom winemaking facility in San Francisco.

WEDNESDAY, July 21, 2004

# Crushpad eliminates middlemen

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cost is dramatically reduced.

"There's a lot of mouths to feed in that (food) chain," says Brill. "We just simplify it."

Depending on the source of grapes and other factors, a bottle of wine made at Crushpad will generally cost \$9 to \$14. Brill estimates that wine of this quality would normally retail for \$25 to \$45.

Crushpad will also help its customers label, sell and market their wine should they decide they want to enter the retail market.

Brill, who has 15 years experience founding and building tech start-ups, is also an inveterate winemaker. He ripped up the backyard of his Potrero Hill home and planted Pinot Noir vines. When that wasn't enough, he made bleary-eyed runs to wine country vineyards, hauling the grapes back to his garage-cum-winery.

Tracey Brandt, Crushpad's director of sales and marketing, has a similar background. With a perfectly respectable career in high tech, she and her husband took a year off to travel to France and intern with Eric Texier, a respected Rhone and Maconnais winemaker.

Now, Brandt and her husband, Jared, are prepared to give up the comfort of a double income for the uncertain world of winemaking. In addition to her role at Crushpad, she and her husband plan to make a line of French-inspired wines at the facility.

"Who needs good clothes anymore?" she says. "Let's just make wine."

The Brandt's winery-within-



RON LEWIS — Staff

**HARD AT WORK:** Michael Brill, Crushpad's president and CEO, uses a bung-hole enlarger on a wine barrel at the company's custom winemaking facility in San Francisco.

a-winery will be called A Donkey and Goat Winery.

While Brill expects custom winemaking to be the bulk of his business, Crushpad will also offer "custom crush" services to professional winemakers who want to make small lots of wine

and need the flexibility and convenience afforded by the winery. While many California wineries rent out their facilities to smaller winemakers, they often don't allow winemakers to make small quantities of wine. At Crushpad, small is good.

**"Who needs good clothes anymore? Let's just make wine."**

Tracey Brandt  
CRUSHPAD'S DIRECTOR  
OF SALES AND MARKETING

Crushpad shares its building with several like-minded neighbors. A brewery, a restaurant and a wine distributor are all moving in. Brill and Brandt joke that to become a tenant in the old building, you have to have a liquor license.

Crushpad will be San Francisco's second winery. Fritz Maytag of the renowned Anchor Steam Brewery operates his York Creek Vineyards winery on nearby Potrero Hill.

Brill hopes his passion for winemaking will spread to others. He says that judging by the mountain of e-mail he's received from interested winemakers, Crushpad is tapping into a lot of pent-up demand.

"They're coming out of the woodwork," he says.

But unlike the dot-com companies that descended on San Francisco a few years ago with lots of cash and half-baked business plans, Brill is taking a more cautious approach. For now, he's keeping his day job—but maybe not for long. If all goes well, he's considering expanding to other locations around the country.

"We have this take over the world strategy," he says. "I have no doubt we'll take off."

► For more information, go to [www.crushpadwine.com](http://www.crushpadwine.com).

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