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'Bachelor' starts Monday

But Ben focused on wine

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America will have front-row seats to watch hometown hottie Ben Flajnik sort through a bevy of beauties in his quest for true love when the 16th season of "The Bachelor" airs at 8 p.m. Monday, Jan. 2, on ABC.

While the limelight will soon fall on the Sonoma native, he told the *Index-Tribune* he's keeping his focus on the wines, not the fame. "I don't have time to read all the blogs,

and I wouldn't anyway ... I don't really pay attention to all that. Mike, Danny and I are too busy making wine," Flajnik said, referring to his business partners Mike Benziger and Danny Fay. The trio makes wines at Benziger Family Winery under two wine labels: Envolve and Epilogue.

Flajnik said they even changed the name of their cornerstone wine label from Evolve to Envolve to get away from the brand recognition that was established over the summer when he was the runner up on ABC's sister series, "The Bachelorette."

"We wanted to break the business away from the reality TV thing and just focus on really good wines," Flajnik said. "We wanted people to know it wasn't a gimmick."

While he admits his appearances on reality shows has been a bonanza for the brand, he doesn't want it to define the business. ("The Bachelor") was an experience I wanted to do on my own," he said. "But at Envolve, we're less focused on 'The Bachelor' and more focused on the community and making great wines."

But for the next few months, the reality-television-loving-community will be fixated on "Bachelor Ben" as he hangs out in a mansion with 25 romantic hopefuls, slowly paring the number down until he finds the right one from him. The potential bachelorettes come

from across the country, with a variety of backgrounds, from nurses to Internet entrepreneurs. Each week, during the famous (or infamous) "Rose Ceremony," he will have to decide which girl goes home, with lots of group dates, single dates and exotic adventures in foreign countries along the way.

"My mom and sister are happy because they got a free trip," laughed Flajnik, referring to the lavish vacation that always occurs near the end of the show's season.

Flajnik has spent the last several months filming, which took him away from the winery during a hectic harvest. He said that, despite the unsettled weather that made for a tenuous growing season, they're excited about the wines that are being produced.

"Our pinot looks great," he said, adding that their 2010 pinot noir just earned a 90-point rating from *Wine Enthusiast*, as did their 2009 cabernet sauvignon.

Envolve will produce around 2,400 cases this year, split between a biodynamic rosé, two sauvignon blancs, a cabernet sauvignon and a pinot noir.

Flajnik said that the brand would be limited to 5,000 cases and focused on small wine production. Epilogue, their value brand priced between \$10 and \$15 a bottle, will produce around 4,500 cases of a chardonnay and a red

blend this year.

"(Epilogue) just got picked up by Lucky's and we're talking with other distributors," Flajnik said. "We'll grow that brand until the demand runs out. Envolve we'll keep on the smaller side."

Flajnik said he sees the show as an opportunity to showcase all of Sonoma, and take it out of the shadow cast by Napa Valley. He hopes it will inspire more tourism and attention to the wines produced in Sonoma.

"We're trying to lift the veil on winemaking, in Sonoma specifically," he said. "We're hoping to bring more exposure to the Valley and all the winemakers here."

When it comes to seeing himself on TV, Flajnik said it's "awkward" to watch himself sometimes. He prefers to watch it with close friends who understand the veil of secrecy he must protect until the winner is revealed.

"It's too hard to watch it with big groups because people have too many questions I can't answer," Flajnik said.

The glare of the spotlight that will focus on Flajnik in coming months represents an average of 10 million viewers each week.

That's a lot of public exposure, But Flajnik said he's hopeful the attention won't interrupt his day-to-day.

"I want to go back to my regular life," he said, adding that so far "everything feels like normal."

