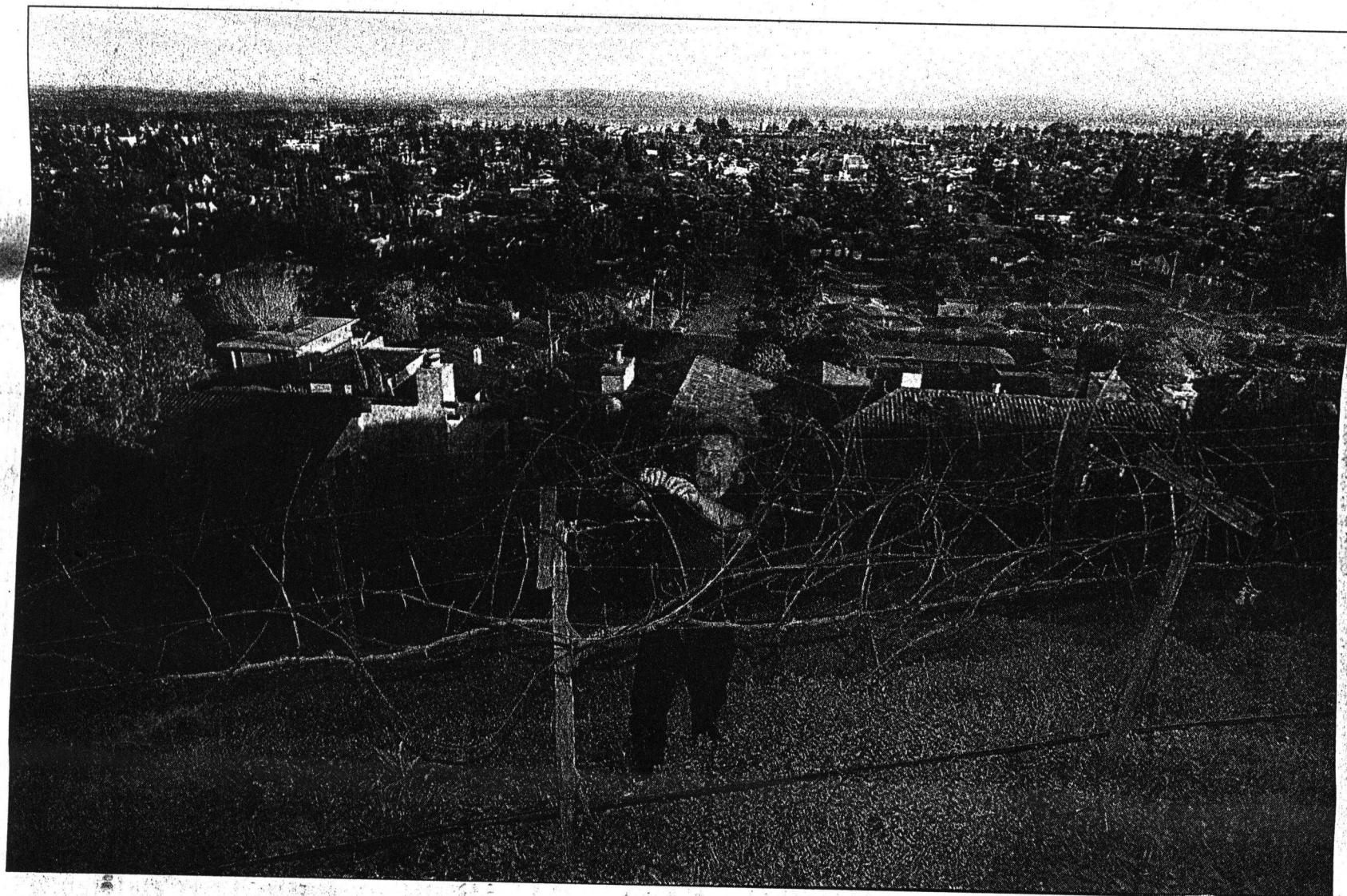


# THE BACKYARD VINEYARD

Because of high land costs, many Santa Cruz Mountains vintners buy their grapes from high-tech industry's 'gentleman farmers'



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Ted Kirkiles has several rows of pinot noir grapes in the yard of his Westside Santa Cruz home. Below, he examines wine he made from his grapes.

By **STETT HOLBROOK**  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

**L**and-poor Santa Cruz Mountains winegrowers are looking to well-heeled property owners to help meet the growing demand for premium wines.

The high-tech economy that produces software, silicon chips and computers is indirectly keeping Santa Cruz Mountains winemakers in grapes, said Matt Oetinger, owner of Victorian Vineyards, a Los Altos-based vineyard consulting business.

"It's sort of ironic," he said.

Most of his clients are wealthy Silicon Valley executives with large homes on large lots who like the idea of sipping a glass of wine as they look out over an acre or two of chardonnay vines on their property. Much of their fruit is snatched up by

local wineries.

Business is good for Oetinger. He's booked up for the next two years. That's good news for local winemakers who need a steady supply of grapes.

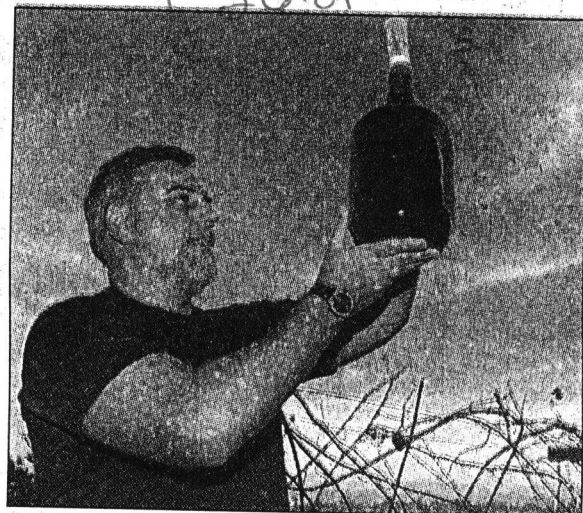
"If you want to put Santa Cruz Mountains on the label, there's not a whole lot of raw material," Oetinger said.

Grapes from the Santa Cruz Mountains appellation, which runs from Woodside to southern Santa Cruz County, are prized for their intense fruity flavor. But land prices as steep as the terrain make large vineyards a rarity.

Part of what makes the wines so good is the quality of grapes that go into them, local winemakers say. Like a teacher with a small class of students, winegrowers can give small vineyards one-on-one attention.

"You treasure a small vineyard," said Marty

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Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Berna Bruzzone has replaced a softball diamond with an acre of chardonnay grapes in the front yard of her Scotts Valley home.

## Wine: Vintners buy grapes from suburbanite growers

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Mathis, president and winemaker for Kathryn Kennedy Winery. "Smaller is better. Definitely."

Most Santa Cruz Mountains wineries truck in grapes from around the state. To meet production demands spurred in part by affluent wine drinkers, wineries who want to put the Santa Cruz Mountains appellation on their label have to shop for fruit from a number of small vineyards.

"It's worth staying in the appellation because the quality is superior to Napa or Sonoma," Mathis said. "We seek out the little guys to stay here."

The practice was common years ago in the Burgundy region of France, Mathis said. Winery representatives known as "negotiants" traveled around small growing areas buying grapes and raw wine from "gentleman farmers," hauling the juice back to the winery where it was blended into a local vintage.

Acquiescing to development pressures, Mathis and members of his family have decided to plow under 8 acres of prime cabernet sauvignon for a luxury home development. But he hopes nearby landowners can be coaxed into planting vines of their own and selling him their fruit.

The David Bruce Winery, makers of celebrated pinot noir, routinely purchases about 30 tons of local fruit from various sources to supplement their vineyards.

"That's really common here," said winemaker Greg Stokes. "We buy as much as we can from the Santa Cruz Mountains."

**'It's worth staying in the appellation because the quality is superior to Napa or Sonoma. We seek out the little guys to stay here.'**

MARTY MATHIS,  
KATHRYN KENNEDY WINERY

If a vineyard produces enough wine it will be labeled with a single vineyard designation but smaller quantities go into Santa Cruz Mountains blends.

But for Ron Mosley, vineyard and estate manager for Cinnabar Vineyards and Winery, running around to small vineyards to get enough fruit became a headache.

"It's easier to go to Paso Robles and get 10 tons from one vineyard rather than get grapes from 10 vineyards," he said.

Backyard vineyards have become lifestyle choices for many Silicon Valley executives, said Eddy DeVine, vineyard consultant. DeVine installs vineyards and also teaches homeowners how to make their own wine.

"Generally speaking it's going to be around the nicer homes," he said. "It can get kind of costly."

For a homeowner with an acre lot who wants DeVine's full-service treatment, the cost is about \$100,000. It's somewhere between expensive farming and cheap landscaping, he said.

"They get wine as residue instead of grass clippings," he said.

Peggy Fleming, the ice skater, has a vineyard in the area. So do priests at Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church.

"We must have hundreds of them," says Saratoga city planner Eric Pearson.

Saratoga attorney Mark Pierce squeezes one or two barrels of wine from a quarter-acre of cabernet sauvignon vines. Now into his sixth harvest, he has watched the vineyard trend become popular with the tech crowd. "With all due respect, I was ahead of a lot of these people," he says. "It takes a while to get into it."

Twenty-five-year Scotts Valley resident Berna Bruzzone turned a softball and bocci ball field into a 500-plant chardonnay vineyard. She said the vineyard appeals to her family's Italian heritage. Although the 3-year-old vineyard has not borne much fruit yet, Bruzzone said Mathis has expressed interest in future harvests.

"He's looking for a very small chardonnay outlet," she said.

Mathis wants to work with local landowners to grow grapes on their property but he is unwilling to indulge them by making wine for them.

"It's sort of like they're just in it for show," he said. "We like the ones who are satisfied to say 'this wine has some of my grapes.'"

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