



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

This year's grapes came early. Winemakers say they think the resulting wines will have a nice balance of sugar and acid.

Purple Crush

Wineries



Melisio Leon Perez rakes grapes into a machine which crushes the grapes and allows them to release their juice.

9-29-04

The harvest comes early to the Santa Cruz Mountains

By PEGGY TOWNSEND
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

First, the big, blue flatbed truck knocked down the mailbox.

Then its tires gouged a fat, new ditch alongside the driveway.

And other than the fact that the truck, loaded with 12 tons of Zinfandel grapes, arrived a couple hours late and the grapes in the vineyard arrived about three weeks early, harvest season is going fine at Burrell School Vineyards.

It's what the annual wine grape harvest is all about — long days filled with the sweet scent of fruit, hard work and little surprises like smashed mailboxes.

It's an event being played out all over the Santa Cruz Mountains as the grape harvest arrives, like an American Idol contestant — very early and with a lot of potential.

Vineyard manager Mark Seifert just shrugs about the mailbox and the new dri-



MOULTON

veway ditch as he jumps onto a forklift and begins moving 1,000-pound bins of fat, black grapes onto a pad to be crushed and stemmed.

Workers Carlos and Melesio Leon-Perez pick leaves out of the crush machine, their arms sticky with juice.

The forklift makes a robotic whine.

"The harvest is just a total sensory overload," says Burrell School Vineyards co-owner Anne Moulton as she watches the grapes, which are from Amador County, being crushed and stemmed.

"It's the smell, the sticky fingers, the sweet taste of grapes in your mouth."

It's also the culmination of a year of hard, anxious work.

Early to rise

This year's grape harvest is one of the earliest on record for much of the 1,340 acres of vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains appellation.

Only a few of the coastal vineyards are reporting a normal harvest schedule, according to the Santa Cruz Mountains Winegrowers Association.

The rest of the 2,500 to 3,000 tons of grapes picked in the Santa Cruz Mountains appel-

If You Go

WHAT: Burrell School Vineyards.

WHERE: 24040 Summit Road, Los Gatos.

HOURS: Tasting room open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays.

PRICES: Burrell School Vineyards wines range in price from \$20-\$35.

DETAILS: (408) 353-6290.

lation came two to three weeks early.

It happened because of a balmy March, says Moulton as she sits on her tasting-room deck which looks over the slope of chardonnay, pinot noir and merlot grapes, she and her husband, Dave, grow.

"The vines started their growth cycle much earlier than normal," she said.

The result is that their normal mid-October chardonnay harvest started at the end of August.

Their merlot harvest, which usually happens at the end of October, is a full month early.

Wineries like Clos LaChance and Ridge Vineyards also say they are picking two to

Wine

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three weeks early. By mid-September, their harvests were at the halfway mark.

Burrell's Seifert says he is expecting wines from this year to have a nice balance of sugar and acid because of the early and moderate growing season.

"It will be a non-flabby wine," he says, which gives him and Moulton pause as they try to define the word "non-flabby."

"Exciting" is as close as they can come.

Split and crush

Burrell School's 10-acre vineyard sits on a sunny, southwest-facing hill.

The soil is good for grape growing, says Moulton. It's a butano formation with underlying sandstone that was all mixed up by the San Andreas fault, which lies in a canyon just across from the winery.

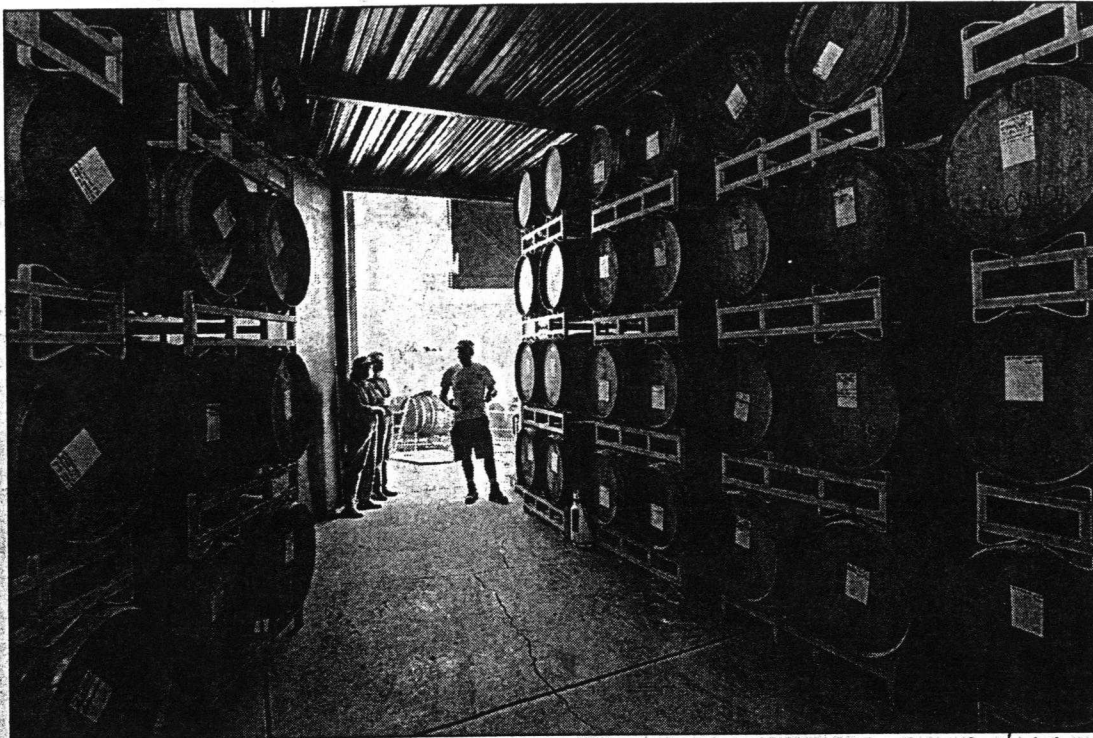
In laymen's terms, that means the ground's not very fertile, which is excellent for growing grapes.

Moulton and her husband bought the land around a one-room, 1890-era schoolhouse three decades ago and began to plant their vines in 1991.

Both amateur winemakers — Dave worked in high-tech for years — they decided making wine professionally was what they wanted to do "when we really grew up," Moulton says.

Now, the winery turns out 5,000 cases of wine. Almost all of it done the old fashioned way — by hand.

Winemaking is a hurry up and



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Burrell School Winery owner Anne Moulton, marketer Laura Ness and vineyard manager Mark Seifert inspect barrels of wine they have stored in their cellar.

wait business.

During this time of year, Seifert says he gets to the winery about 5 a.m. and often works late into the night.

As the grapes are picked, they are run through a crusher-stemmer machine, which looks like a corkscrew turned on its side.

The machine gently breaks open the grapes' skins and drops them into an open, 400-gallon fermentation bin. The stems are spit out the side.

At Burrell, tons of grapes are crushed this way.

With the red juice and skins filling the fermentation bins, the

Moultons and Seifert add a commercial yeast strain for fermentation.

Then comes the really hard part.

Punching down

"The first week or two, we punch down every two to four hours," says Seifert, who wears a baseball cap and a dusty T-shirt reading, "Fish On."

Punching down means the Moultons and Seifert use a giant potato-masher-looking tool to push the grape skins to the bottom of the vats.

"You want to extract the flavor

and color from the skins," Seifert says.

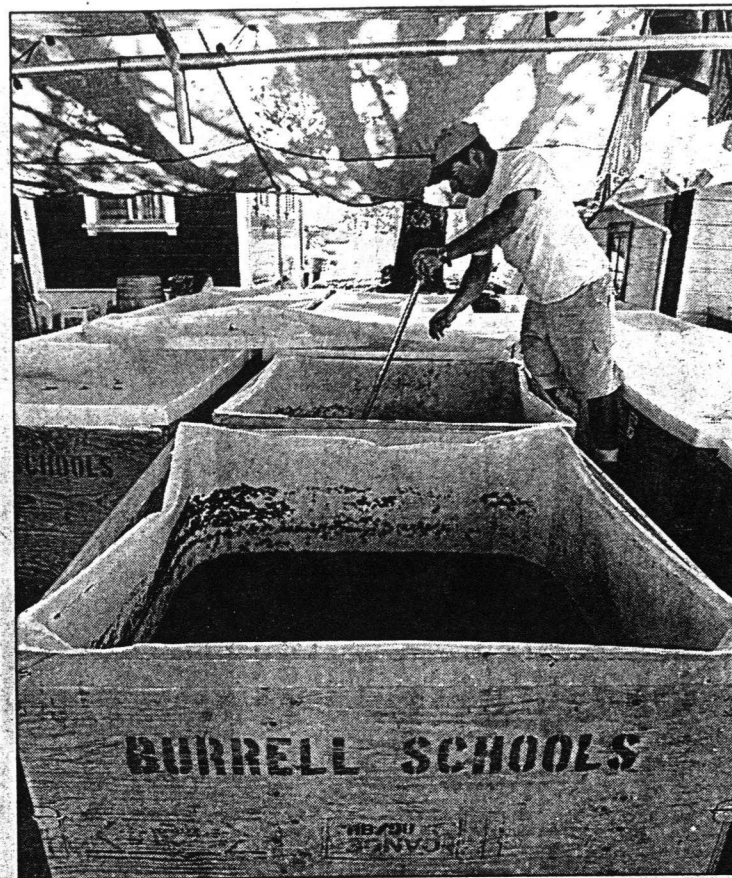
Big vineyards have machines to "punch down" the grape skins.

Not at Burrell School Vineyards. It's done by hand.

"At the harvest, one day runs into the next," Seifert says. "You can get close to 20-hour days."

The juice and skin may sit in the vats for as long as a month. Then, there is a second press, which gets the last vestiges of juice from the grapes.

What's left is grape skins that are as dry as corn flakes and barrels of new wine stacked in Burrell School Vineyards' cool, humid-



Vineyard manager Mark Seifert punches down the wine skins every two to four hours during the first weeks.

ity-controlled sheds.

Then comes the waiting part.

The wine stays in the barrels for up to 24 months until they are bottled and sold in stores like Shoppers Corner, New Leaf, Staff of Life and K's Liquors.

Wow

Walking through the vineyard, thick bunches of merlot grapes hanging from vines, Moulton talks

about the heat wave that came in August and caused the grape sugars to spike in just three days.

The chardonnay vines are empty of grapes, the merlot are awaiting picking this week.

"There is very much excitement during the harvest," Moulton says.

"It's something you work for all year. "It really is a 'wow.'"

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