

HAVING A VINE TIME

Wineries

Local winemakers ready to celebrate with Vintners Festival

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COMMUNITY participation is a Santa Cruz tradition, and the ninth annual Vintner's Festival is no exception. The next two weekends will find more than 30 Santa Cruz Mountains wineries open to the public, sharing their harvests, their farms and fields, and their expertise with experienced and novice wine aficionados. Sponsored by the Santa Cruz Mountains Winegrowers Association, the festival also pairs local restaurants and caterers with selected vineyards.

"For us it's a celebration. Our grapes are beginning to mature, the leaves are on the vine, we survived another winter," said Karen Hibble, director of the association. "You can see the promise of what's to come."

"It highlights what we think the Santa Cruz Mountains are all about — the beauty, the splendor, the rugged terrain, and of course, the great wines this region can produce," she said. "It's a true celebration of hard work and coming to fruit."

For those who know wine, the festival provides the chance to sample and purchase select wines that are only available in limited quantities; and for those unfamiliar with wine, it's an opportunity to ask questions in a casual, fun atmosphere.

This is also a chance to meet the winemakers themselves, added Hibble. Chances are you're acquainted with at least one. Could be your doctor or dentist, your landlord or that contractor across the street, because in this area, vineyards are not the massive farms they are in, say Napa or Sonoma; the majority are small "Mom and Pop" operations, with the average vineyard being only one or two acres.

Hibble said there's a total of only 350 acres planted in this county. The winemakers necessarily have to be involved with more than one venture in order to keep their creative enterprise flowing — be it chardonnay, pinot noir or cabernet.

"Wine is their passion, as an artist makes a picture; they do it because they have a passion for wine," said Hibble. Each bottle gets individual attention, ultimately yielding a very unique product.

Don Harris retired from years of being a building inspector and "somehow" ended up running Trout Gulch Vineyards with his business partner, Bernie Turgeon. Justifiably proud of his award winning chardonnays and pinot noirs, Harris' days are now spent tending the vines and overseeing the



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Winemaker Don Harris spends his days among the vines at Trout Gulch vineyards.

operation of the beautiful 16-acre farm in Aptos. Each year, the vineyards host up to 600 visitors during the annual Vintner's Festival, offering tours, hors d'oeuvres and wine tastings on an outdoor patio overlooking the green, budding vines.

David Bruce, whose 25 acre-winery on the Summit produces premiere pinot noirs and chardonnays that have shocked the European winemaking world, started out as a doctor. In fact, for a quarter of a century he combined both careers, calling himself "one of the crazy ones" who just couldn't stop in his quest to make the perfect pinot noir.

"It's like the Holy Grail of winemaking. Any winemaker worth his salt wants to make the great pinot noir," said Bruce, explaining that what comes between this grape and the finished wine is the most complex process of all. "It is the big challenge in winemaking."

And yet it is this distinctive wine the Santa Cruz Mountains is known for. According to Bruce, the cool Santa Cruz County side yields the most intri-

cately flavored pinots and chardonnays to be found. Although at first glance it might seem Mother Nature designed the Santa Cruz Mountains as an obstacle to any kind of farming, the experienced winemakers — and wine drinkers — of the area will tell you otherwise. That steep, rugged terrain, those sweet, secluded valleys and the influence of the fog and ocean combine to make a distinctive microclimate that produces some of the finest wines in the world — literally right in our back yards.

But winegrowing is not just about creating and enjoying a delicious product; there's another side to this cottage industry that's often overlooked. The farms and vineyards tucked away in the Santa Cruz Mountains are a natural resource that we're fortunate to have, and the stewardship of those lands is passed on from generation to generation of winegrowers.

"We have the agriculture here, it's important that we keep this land for grape-growing," said Hibble. "It captures the essence of what we all care about."

Joining the celebration

THE NINTH annual Vintner's Festival takes place from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. June 1-2 and June 8-9.

This weekend, a dozen wineries in San Mateo County will participate; the following weekend, 21 wineries in Santa Cruz County will be open to the public. Special attractions include live music, celebrity chefs, barrel tastings, art displays and more. Some wineries will be set up in local restaurants, including Cafe Rio in Aptos and Theo's French Restaurant in Soquel, where more elaborate meals will be available.

Cost for the festival is \$15, which entitles you to entrance on both weekends at all participating locations. Call 479-9463 for more information, or send \$15 per person to the Santa Cruz Mountains Winegrowers Association, P.O. Box 3000, Santa Cruz, CA 95063. You'll receive a commemorative wine glass and a detailed map.

Designated drivers are recommended; or, the Santa Cruz Touring Company has vans running each day on both weekends. Cost for these rides is \$35-\$50 per person, per day. For more information about this service, call 429-8687.