

Winemaking At Its Best At Felton-Empire

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The clouds dripped a gentle mist across the orchards, wineglasses clinked, and a time-honored ritual of tasting and smelling the bouquet of a freshly decanted vintage took place.

Rows of brown-black stumps sprouted shoots of green White Reisling and Red Cabernet stock, drinking thirstily of the rich bounty of the sky above Felton-Empire Vineyards.

"Great, just great!" said John Pollard as the latest sweet Reisling burst against our palates with a flood of tangy flavor. "It's a gold medal for sure."

Lack of modesty easily forgiven. Last year's Reisling overcame the California State Fair's wine judges reverence for another fine Reisling from Chateau St. James in Sonoma. The gold went to FeltonEmpire.

This is wine country, these Santa Cruz Mountains. Thirteen small wineries and one medium-size one carry on the vintner's art already over 100 years old here.

Fighting back the urgings of urbanization, Santa Cruz County's winemakers are as fervid a bunch as those anywhere in France, Germany, or the Sonoma-Napa-Mendocino counties in California with their great wine conglomerates.

The fire at Vincent Locatelli's Sunrise Winery last week on Empire Grade was a blow to a winery in operation since 1933. The Vine Hill Vineyard was one of the first, if not the first, in the county to produce wine for sale after being planted in 1858, and its name is taken by a new Dick Smothers winery off Highway 17.

Other wineries include the well-known Bargetto's, Nicasio, Michael T. Parson, Roudon-Smith, Santa Cruz Mountain, Frick, Ahlgren, David Bruce, P. and M. Staiger, Dan Wheeler, and Vines of Nepenthe.

Felton-Empire's gold medal at the state fair was natural from its heritage. It is the former Hallcrest Winery of the late San Francisco attorney Chafee Hall. Hall's closing of Hallcrest in 1964 after nearly 20 years of winemaking in Felton saddened the cognoscenti among winebibbers, for his wines were often prize-winners.

What makes a great wine? "Good grapes, to start with," said winemaker and consulting biochemist Leo McCloskey of Felton-Empire. "The best wines can't be made from bad grapes."

Good grapes come from our mountains, with their well-drained soils, sun and usually generous rainfall. McCloskey prefers small grapes with high sugar content, which develops the fine esters of distinctive flavor. In areas like the San Joaquin Valley, the grapes are force-fed water with irrigation, and become large and bloated. This waters down the wine, "washing out" the flavor.

Only about 60 acres are producing wine grapes of high quality in Northern Santa Cruz County, said vineyard Felton-Empire Manager Jim Beauregard, "and we control 45 of those acres." Many wineries, including Felton-Empire, import good grapes from neighboring county vineyards.

It was Beauregard, scion of a grape-growing family which owns Shoppers' Corner market in Santa Cruz, who saved the Hallcrest vineyards for the new company.

After Chafee Hall's death, the family turned the vineyard over to Concannon, a larger commercial firm. Finding no one to care for the vineyards, the family called Beauregard. He nursed the ailing vines back to health (vines produce for 25 to 50 years, and those in Felton are now 37 years old). With Pollard, they took over the lease.

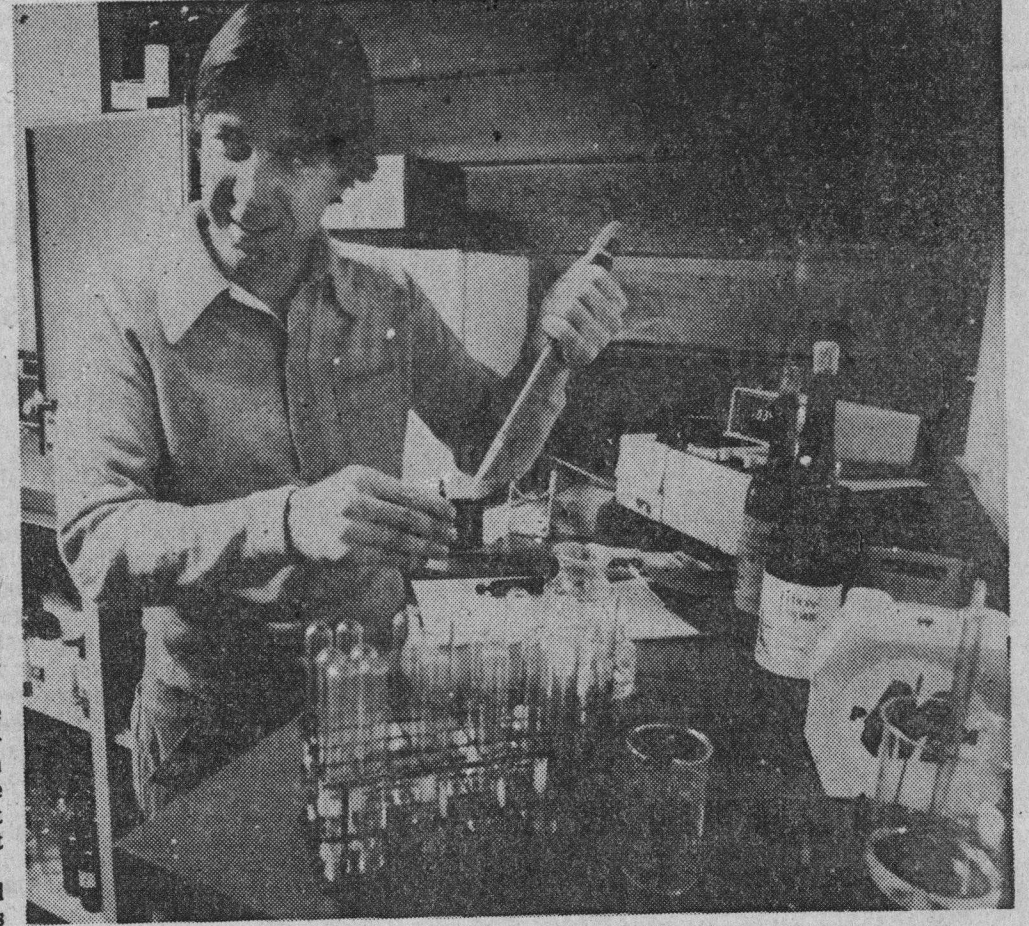
All of Hallcrest's equipment was sold, and the new partnership of Beauregard and Pollard had just a building and a vineyard in 1976. They added a partner, McCloskey, and under his direction new stainless steel tanks holding from 500 to 2,000 gallons of developing wine were installed, along with the requisite oak barrels for aging, and a laboratory for testing.

"We use the German technique for the Rieslings," McCloskey explained. "In Germany, where it gets very cold, the fermentation process is stopped early, before most of the grape sugar is turned to alcohol. Ours runs about 10 percent alcohol, instead of the 13 to 14 percent of drier wines."

A refrigeration system chills the tanks, and McCloskey and assistant Pat Mahaney mothers the wine with a chemist's care. "Modern science is really the Americanization of winemaking. It's warmer in California than in the European wine country, so wines spoil faster." Cracks in a wine barrel house bacteria which can turn a good wine to vinegar, and McCloskey developed a technique which detects the increase in acetic acid before the finest tongue can sense it. He saved thousands of barrels for the large Ridge winery where he worked previously, and still acts as consulting chemist to other wineries.

It may take three to five years for a good red wine to go to market, or even longer. Two years in a barrel, where the tannic acid from the oak enters the wine (more for young oak barrels, much less for aged barrels) and more years in the bottle reach to "smooth" the flavor. A top red Cabernet can take 10 years.

Red wine, of course, is produced by fermenting the juice with the grape skins. The color and flavor leaches from the skins into the wines, and the varieties of taste can be endless. McCloskey uses the "French technique" of more natural fermentation for FeltonEmpire's Cabernet Sauvignon. It will carry the Hallcrest and Santa



Winemaker-Chemist Leo McCloskey depends on instruments, not taste buds, to keep the quality and color right at Felton-Empire.

Cruz labels.

"In a good year, the Caberet is inky black and sturdy," he said. In a bad year, grapes from other vineyards may ease the color and flavor.

Since only about 6,000 to 9,000 gallons are produced yearly at Felton-Empire, the problem of sales manager Bill Gibbs is how to be fair in spreading the product among buyers. Virtually an entire production run is sold out in advance and even Beauregard has trouble getting some for Shopper's Corner.

Prices are \$8 to \$10 per bottle, not high in comparison with other prize-winners like Chateau St. James. "We don't want to gouge," said Pollard. "We don't think it's right."

Most Felton-Empire wine goes to restaurants, with the rest for sale in stores. Shad-owbrook has been an early and favored restaur-

ant customer in Santa Cruz County.

Some is for sale at the winery, up Felton-Empire Road about a quarter mile north of the Highway 9-Graham Hill Road intersection. You have to look sharp for the sign, but if you see the vineyards on the left, you passed it. Call 335-3939 for appointments Thursday and Sundays.

On those days, a pleasant lunch or winetasting goes along with the tour—for a fee, of course—depending on the mood and energy of the staff.

For winemaking is gentlemanly business, to be done at a leisurely step in tune with the tranquil vineyards and hills. The city bustle is lost in quiet contemplation or wine-spiced conversation.

"Wine is a food, to be eaten with other foods," said Gibbs. "It is to be savored." Like life.



Jim Beauregard, vineyard manager and Felton-Empire partner, looks over aging but still-producing vines.

Takeovers Again Become Popular

NEW YORK (AP) — Corporate takeovers, the hottest game in town last summer and fall, are heating up again. And one of the new attempted takeovers erupted into bitterness this past week.

"We're going to beat them and we're going to beat them as badly as they deserve," predicted T. Roland Berner, chairman of Curtiss-Wright Corp., which is attempting to gain control of Kennecott Copper Corp., a firm with three times the annual sales volume of

BOC spokesmen said the firm would offer \$50 a share for all outstanding shares of Airco's stock and eventually would pay an additional \$7 per share to those who tendered shares under a \$43-per-share offer made last January. Near the end of the week, Airco stock was at \$49 per share.

In other business developments:

—The Carter administration, beset by a falling dollar, rising prices and large-scale oil imports, was drafting what was