

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Raise your glasses

LOCAL WINERIES ARE TOASTING A VERY GOOD YEAR

Wineries

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By **STETT HOLBROOK**

Sentinel staff writer

The first vintage of the 21st century is shaping up to be a good one for Santa Cruz County wineries.

Local winemakers say a long growing season without extended hot or cold spells produced an abundance of high-quality grapes.

While the summer was a bit cooler than usual and October rains made some winemakers nervous about grape rot, the 2000 yield looks to be the best in the past three years.

"I think 2000 is starting off as an outstanding vintage," said Paul Wofford, winemaker for Soquel's Bargetto Winery.

There are about 40 wineries in the Santa Cruz Mountains appellation, a region that includes San Mateo, Santa Cruz and Santa Clara counties.

It's difficult to put a dollar amount on the local wine industry, but about 1 million gal-

lons of wine are produced in the appellation, said John Hibble, executive director of the Santa Cruz Mountains Winegrowers Association. By comparison, 525 million gallons are produced statewide with \$12.3 billion in retail sales.

Because of high land costs and mountainous terrain, there are only about 330 acres of vineyards in Santa Cruz County. But micro-climates allow for the cultivation of a variety of wine grapes including pinot noir, chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, syrah, and Riesling.

Storrs Winery, a Santa Cruz-based winery with about 35 acres of grapes in the county, is corking an excellent year, said co-owner Steve Storrs.

"I think the overall quality is very, very high," he said.

This year's warm but not too warm weather led to a long growing season that produced good "fruit set," grape flowers that developed into fruit under ideal conditions, Storrs said.

In a testament to this year's long grow-

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Jesus Arevalo harvests zinfandel grapes Thursday in Bonny Doon.



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Winemaker Steve Storr watches over the harvesting of Zinfandel grapes Thursday in Bonny Doon.

Grapes

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ing season, Storrs spent Thursday harvesting the last of the year's grapes, zinfandel from his Beaugard Vineyard in Bonny Doon.

"These will be the last grapes in Santa Cruz County," he said.

It is rare for grapes to be harvested so late in November.

For Bonny Doon Vineyard, the county's largest wine producer, the year produced the unusual combination of high yields and high-quality grapes, said associate winemaker John Locke. Big harvests generally produce lower quality wine.

"We're really happy," he said, catching his breath following the busy harvest.

Bonny Doon Vineyard lost its local vineyards to Pierce's disease, a vine-withering bacteria, in 1994 and now owns vineyards in

Soledad. The winery also buys grapes from elsewhere in the state and Washington.

Cigare Volant, Bonny Doon's flagship red wine, should be especially good in 2000 because grenache, one of the main varieties in the blend, grew especially well this year, Locke said, calling it "fabuloso."

The county's generally cool weather and hilly terrain usually makes for low grape yields. But grapes that struggle often make great wines because flavors are concentrated, said Mark Curtis, manager of Pearl Alley Bistro, a Santa Cruz restaurant with one of the county's deepest wine lists.

"The same thing that makes things difficult for them makes for good wine," he said.

Sometimes local conditions make wines that are too concentrated, which can make some local wines taste "hard" or "edgy," he said.

Grape-growing conditions were excellent across the state. According to Allied Domecq Wines USA, a Healdsburg-based winery conglomerate, California winemakers crushed

about 3.2 million tons of grapes this year, up about 600,000 tons over 1999.

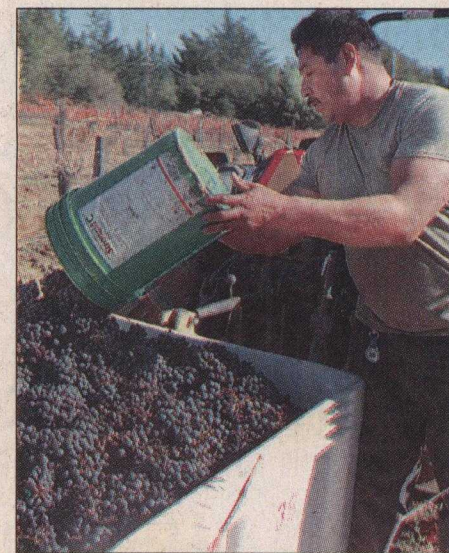
The dreaded glassy winged sharpshooter, a flying insect that carries Pierce's disease, did not land on local vineyards. The leaf hopper is wine enemy No. 1 in the state but local quarantine efforts have kept the bug at bay.

At David Bruce Winery, a Los Gatos producer of celebrated pinot noir and other varieties, vineyards produced well this year, although adjacent vineyards were hit by Pierce's disease several years ago.

"It was a great growing year," said Greg Stokes, David Bruce vineyard manager. "We're hoping things stay that way."

As good as the 2000 vintage may prove to be, it won't be available for some time. White wines will start being released this spring, while red wines, which require more barrel aging, will appear on the shelves in late 2001 and 2002.

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Pedro Nolasco loads grapes into a bin to be delivered to Storrs Winery during harvest in Bonny Doon.