

# No chemicals allowed

## Hallcrest Vineyards markets nation's first certified organic wine

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**T**HERE ARE wineries that use organic grapes and there are wineries that don't use sulfites in their processing. But if you want a wine that combines both and is certified organic by the federal government, there is only once choice.

And you don't have to go far to get it.

Hallcrest Vineyards of Felton, under its Organic Wine Works line, has become the first winery in the nation to release a certified organic wine.

That isn't to say there aren't other organic wines. In fact, Hallcrest has produced organic wines for three years. However, getting approval from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms is another matter.

But Hallcrest has made it through the bureaucratic maze, meeting the requirements of the 1990 California Organic Foods Act and the Santa Cruz-based California Certified Organic Farmers.

In Felton on Tuesday, winemaker John Schumacher started bottling Organic Wine Works fumé blanc, one of five wines in the certified organic line. Also certified

are a chardonnay, semillon, pinot noir and merlot.

For Schumacher and his partners, wife Lorraine and sister Shirin, the certification — much of which is an auditing process filled with paperwork that proves the grapes are indeed organic — marks a milestone in a process that has had its share of tribulations.

Getting organic grapes is not difficult, Schumacher said, because grape growers make up the "fastest growing portion of agriculture that is converting to organic growing."

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Dan Coyro/Sentinel

John Schumacher of Hallcrest Vineyards in Felton is now bottling organic fumé blanc.

## Organic

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But processing wine that is free of additives is not so easy.

There are more than 250 substances that can be added to wine. The most notable are sulfites, the only additive that must be listed on the label. Sulfites prevent growth of wild yeast and bacteria and prevent oxidation, which turns wine brown and sour.

But some people are allergic to sulfites, and others just don't like the taste of it, explained Brian Baker, technical coordinator for the organic farmers' organization. For those people, organic wine is a real plus.

The first step in getting rid of sulfites is running an extremely clean operation, said Schumacher.

"If you run a clean enough operation, the wine itself prevents the growth of bacteria," he said. With that in mind, the winery had to tinker with a variety of processes to come up with its own unique system.

That tinkering took about seven months, and Schumacher said Hallcrest came up with a system so clean that it prevents bacteria from forming and prevents the wine from coming in contact with the air. With those objectives met, the winery was able to develop a truly organic winemaking process.

But Hallcrest's problems were not over. In October 1989, the win-

ery had several thousand gallons of organic wine in its tanks when the earthquake hit. Electrical power was knocked out and with it the cooling equipment needed for processing. All the wine was lost and the disaster "almost put us out of business," Schumacher said.

Although Hallcrest is releasing the nation's first certified organic wines, it is not the first winery to be produce a certified organic wine. That honor goes to Sun Pietro Vara in Calistoga, said Baker of the organic farmers organization. But Baker said that winery is not marketing the certified organic wine it produces.

Although the cost of organic grapes is higher than standard grapes, the price of Hallcrest organic wine is comparable or slightly less than its non-organic vintages, Schumacher said. Hallcrest is hoping the organic wines will appeal to people who have stayed away from wine because of sulfites.

While the wines may appeal to some, Schumacher said he does not believe wineries will rush to convert to a totally organic process because of the effort it takes to eliminate sulfites.

*Organic Wine Works wines are available in most local liquor and grocery outlets. The wines also are sold in more than 20 states throughout the United States.*