



(Sentinel Photos by Pete Amos)

Andy Starr and Jim Hall put grapes into the presser.



Jim Hall shovels grapes into the presser.

Felton-Empire Is Achieving Its Initial Goal

One Of A Series

By DENISE SIEBENTHAL
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As he surveyed the acres of vines spreading out before him, winemaker Leo McClosky explained that Felton-Empire Vineyards is a winery devoted to eventually making most of its wines from grapes grown in this county.

The County's Wineries

"With the present vineyards we have, we should be making about 40 percent of our wines with grapes from Santa Cruz County in about four years when we will be able to harvest two or three small vineyards located throughout the county.

"In the long run, we'd like to produce 90 percent of all of our wines from Santa Cruz County grapes and we're moving in that direction more rapidly than any other winery in this county," McClosky said.

The owners of Felton-Empire Vineyards, he added, already control enough vineyards in this county to make 90 percent of their wines from locally-grown grapes, but they are waiting for some of these vineyards to mature.

McClosky and his partners are envisioning the day when this county will again be the well-known grape growing region that it was at the turn of the century when there were 4,000 acres of vineyards planted.

Asked why he and his partners aren't planning to make all their wines eventually from locally-grown grapes, McClosky said, "Blending (of grapes from different areas) helps in bad years. For instance, in 1971-72

it was very cold and wet here and our grapes didn't ripen properly. This happens around once in every 10 years.

"Also, Santa Cruz County isn't appropriate for planting all varieties. For instance, I don't feel this county is good for Zinfandel or Petite Sirah. This is a county for Cabernet in the high areas and for White Riesling and Pinot Noir in the cooler regions."

Felton-Empire Vineyards was founded by a group of men in 1976 with the goal that the winery would produce wines exclusively from grapes grown here.

The men formed a corporation consisting of President John Pollard, Secretary-treasurer Jim Beauregard and McClosky as vice president, winemaker and director of operations.

They located their winery and one of their several vineyards at the site of the once-flourishing Hallcrest Vineyards that was owned by Chaffee Hall off Felton-Empire Road.

In the first year of operation, they stayed true to their goal and made 3,000 gallons of wine from grapes grown locally. Since then, as the winery has grown, Felton-Empire has produced wines from grapes produced out of this area.

In 1976, the first year of operation, the winery released two White Rieslings, two Cabernets and one Zinfandel and became a first-place winner at the prestigious wine competition at the Los Angeles County Fair.

Felton-Empire that year won a gold medal for its late harvest White Riesling. Since then, it has won two other gold medals from the fair for its regular White

Riesling and for a late harvest White Riesling.

"We specialize in white wines and especially in German-style White Riesling," McClosky said.

"They are wines that are low in alcohol, are high quality wines made for aging and have three sugar levels. We have a very dry White Riesling, a semi-sweet White Riesling and the very sweet late harvest wines for dessert."

Today, Felton-Empire Vineyards produces 6,000 gallons of wine from locally-grown grapes and 30,000 gallons of wine from grapes grown outside the county.

While two-thirds of the wines made there are White Riesling or Gewurztraminer, Felton-Empire Vineyards also makes some red wines and is branching out into alcohol-free wines, McClosky explained.

"You have to sell some red wines because people are consuming red wines," he said. "We're very interested in Pinot Noir because it's been a very difficult varietal to produce traditionally . . ."

"We are also doing alcohol-free wine production. You can call it grape juice also. It is unique to produce grape juice from European wine grape stock. It's for someone who doesn't want to drink alcohol at the moment and everyone has those moments."

The winery, operating with 10 employees in the original buildings of Hallcrest Vineyards, is open to the public for winetasting and sales on Saturdays and Sundays from 11 a.m. until 3 p.m. It is located on Felton-Empire Road just west from the intersection with Highway 9.