

Grape growers toast impressive yield



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

There is no shortage of barrels at Alfaro Family Vineyards where Corralitos winemaker Richard Alfaro works in the barrel room.

Wine grapes

SANTA CRUZ COUNTY STATISTICS

ACRES: 574 acres in 2003; 572 acres in 2004.

TONS: 3.3 tons per acre in 2003; 1.2 tons per acres in 2004.

TOTAL PRODUCTION: 1,911 tons in 2003; 686 tons in 2004.

COST: \$1,350 per ton in 2003; \$2,131 per ton in 2004.

TOTAL VALUE: \$2.5 million in 2003; \$1.4 million in 2004.

*These numbers are for Santa Cruz County only and do not include the entire Santa Cruz Mountains appellation.

County, state on pace to eclipse record

By **TOM RAGAN**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

✓ SOQUEL — Vann Slater of Hunter Hill Winery in Soquel harvested so many merlot and syrah grapes this year he's in a bittersweet bind: He doesn't have enough 60-gallon barrels to put all his wine in.

So he's storing the excess in the stainless steel tanks behind his 6-acre winery and vineyard until the American and French oak barrels, which cost \$700 to \$800 each, roll in to the rescue.

"It's going to be a good year

for the consumer," said Slater, whose syrah took first place out of some 2,100 entries at the California State Fair in Sacramento this year.

Slater's yield has been anything but small. He harvested 4 tons of grapes per acre this year, a mother lode in the wine grape growing industry and on par with the sort of volume that's playing out across the state.

Nearly 3.2 million tons of wine grapes were harvested on 500,000 acres from January to October in the Golden State, accounting for the

second largest wine grape crop in state history and a 15 percent increase over last year, according to The Wine Institute in San Francisco and the California Association of Winegrape Growers.

And Santa Cruz County and the Santa Cruz Mountains aren't lagging far behind, relatively speaking, thanks to a new technology that growers embraced more than a decade ago but only now is beginning to pay off.

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With roughly 800 acres of vineyards between Half Moon Bay and Watsonville, already 2,500 tons of grapes have been harvested since January, far more than the nearly 700 tons in 2004. About half of those grapes are in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

A new system of wires and posts that ensures canes stand up straight — which, in turn, provides more shade for the fruit and more breathing room — has all but revolutionized the wine grape growing industry.

So theorizes Prudy Fox, a wine grape consultant who manages 150 acres of vineyards across the county.

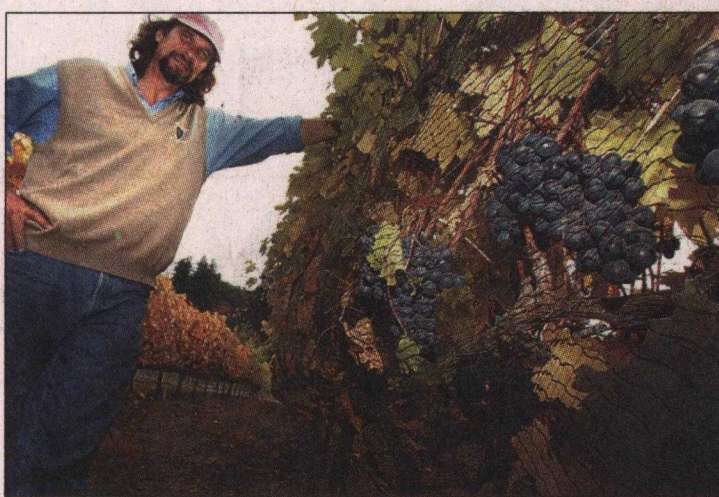
"We're having a 1-in-10 year," says Fox. "And of course the great weather has helped us. We had a great Indian summer and a great consistent fall. There were no heat spikes like last year. There were no heavy rains. And now the flavors are going to be intense, just you wait and see."

The wait, however, will be about four years, in keeping with the sort of anticipation that surrounds the wine industry.

And what growers are lacking in quantity, like Corralitos grower Richard Alfaro, they're making up for in quality.

He only harvested a ton of grapes per acre at his 30-acre vineyard. But the quality of his chardonnay and pinot noir grapes has never been better, he said.

Sometimes what you lose in production to the Central Coast rain and fog, you gain in taste



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Winemaker Richard Alfaro touts the quality of his grapes.

because of less competition, he said.

"We're talking excellent quality, probably the best I've ever had," said Alfaro of Alfaro Family Vineyards as he looked over dozens of 220-liter barrels in the vineyard's store room. "I'm not going to have any problem selling it."

It's this sort of no-fail attitude that has lured more into the wine grape-growing business, and has seen the membership rolls of the Santa Cruz Mountains Wine Growers Association grow more than 25 percent in the past five years.

The association now boasts 66 growers, from Half Moon Bay to Watsonville, according to Shannon Flynn, operations manager and wine club manager for the Aptos-based association.

"A lot of them are people who've made a fortune in the Silicon Valley and now want to try their

hand at something else," said Flynn. "They see wine growing as a fun and sexy thing to do."

That image was reinforced with the release of "Sideways," an Oscar-nominated movie that turned pinot noir into a popular restaurant order overnight, says Jim Schultze of Windy Oaks Estate in Corralitos.

"There's certainly a global attraction to wine and there's a local attraction," says Schultze, who retired from his management consultant firm in the mid-1990s and now grows 15 acres of grapes, 14 of them pinot noir.

"But the business can be difficult," he said. "It takes more time and energy and care than a lot of people realize, and the weather within a half-mile of me in either direction can be so different on any given day."

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