



# CRUSH TIME



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Sheryl Byington-Brissenden, strolling the grounds above, hopes this year's harvest produces wine that stacks up well against the best.

Vineyards in the  
Santa Cruz Mountains  
are ripe for picking,  
which makes this  
time of year  
a barrel of fun

## Wineries

By CAROLYN LEAL  
Sentinel staff writer

**T**HE CRISPNESS OF FALL is in the air as you drive along rural Bear Creek Road in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Golden leaves fall from the trees and grapes are ripening on the vines. Harvest time is near.

Byington Winery plans to celebrate the impending harvest with an annual Crush Party from 6-10 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 8 — complete with grape-stomping, barrel-tasting, a wine aficionado contest, live music, dancing and a harvest feast. The \$29.95 cost includes food, dancing and two glasses of wine.

"The harvest is late this year because we've had an unusually cool spring and summer," says Sheryl Byington-Brissenden, vice president of the winery. "But it's good news. The longer the grapes stay on the vines, the better it is."

The annual harvest festival is a good excuse for wine lovers to visit one of the grandest winery settings in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Byington Winery is housed in an impressive, two-story gray-stone, red tile-roofed building. Surrounded by a Pinot Noir vineyard with red roses marking the ends of rows, it resembles an old mountain winery in France or Italy.

Despite the appearance of age, Byington Winery is relatively

new. It was founded in 1988 by Bill Byington, a former tool-and-die maker, and officially opened in June 1990.

Byington, a self-made man who first tempered steel with a furnace in his garage, created Byington Steel Co., a steel treatment firm in Santa Clara. He had owned the Bear Creek Road property for several years and yearned to create fine wines.

Depending on whom you ask, there are three stories in the family about the founding of the winery, daughter Sheryl says.

"My dad would answer that nearby winemaker David Bruce was always after him to make wine. My mom would say my dad

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# Harvest

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wanted to immortalize himself through winemaking and I think they dangled this idea of a winery so my husband and I would move back from Sacramento."

Sheryl did move back and her husband, Don Brissenden, spearheaded construction of the multi-million dollar winery. Sheryl, a slim blonde with an outgoing manner, created a job for herself with event planning. The winery hosts some 70 weddings a year, plus a variety of corporate events.

ON A RECENT THURSDAY, a group of Hewlett Packard employees met in the winery's upstairs suite, which features an antique-filled living room and a baby grand piano. The French doors open to a patio with stunning views of the mountains and Monterey Bay. The winery also boasts a dining room with dance floor that can seat 150.

Sheryl says the special events helped keep the winery afloat in the early years, as the family learned, hit or miss, to make wine.

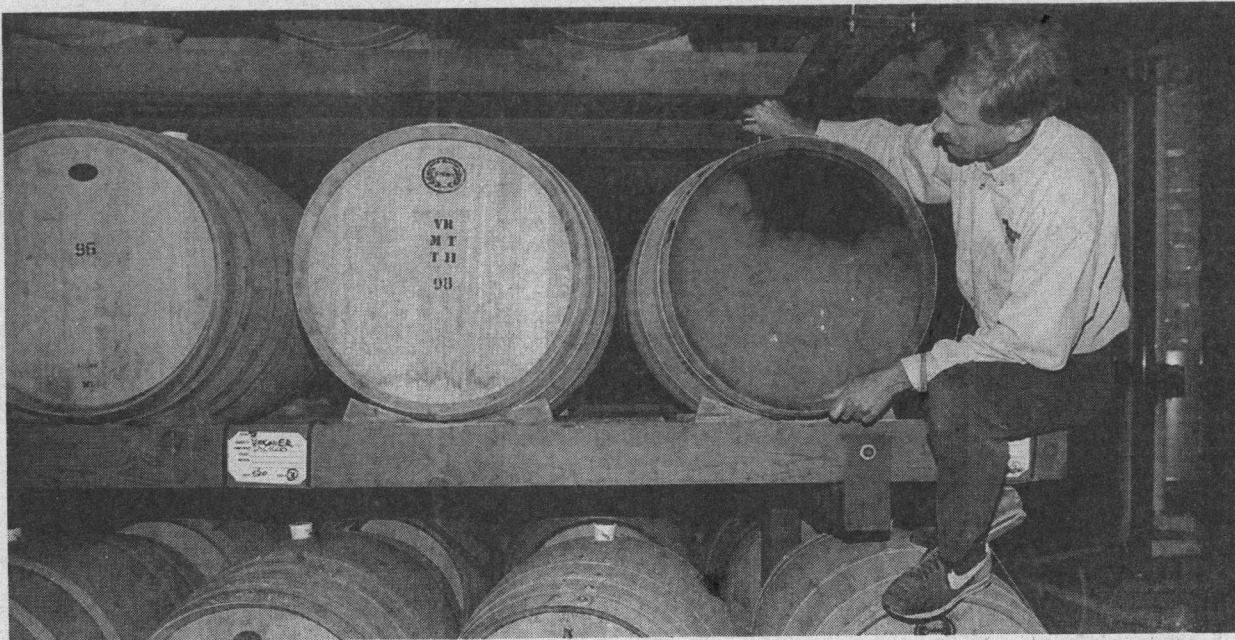
"We were very naive getting into this," she said. "I think we thought you just built a winery, you planted grapes and *voilà*, you've got wine, but it just isn't so. It turned out to be more difficult than we thought.

"It took us a long time before we got a decent wine," she said. "You can't make a good wine without good grapes."

In 1988, the news was so bad, the winery decided not to release a disappointing vintage.

Fortunately, the quality improved and in 1996, Byington won a blue ribbon from the California State Fair for its Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay. The winery specializes in Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay, Cabernet and Pinot Noir and produced 7,000 cases of wine this year.

Today, Byington is in the capable hands of winemaker Don Blackburn, who studied French and forestry at the University of Montana and learned winemaking in the Burgundy region of France. Blackburn has a special philosophy about winemaking. Contrary to the French, who believe it is the land that makes good wine, Blackburn believes it is people who make good wine. This sentiment is posted on



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Winemaker Don Blackburn stirs a barrel of cabernét at Byington's mountain winery.

"I have repeated this concept so often that it is starting to sound like a political slogan," Blackburn says. "People in the tasting room have knowledge of the vineyard and people in the vineyards have a basic understanding of where we're marketing the wine. There's a feeling throughout the winery that it takes all of us to do it. Even though we have different backgrounds, we rely on each other."

BLACKBURN SAYS HE was drawn to winemaking because it's a highly ecological endeavor. "It needs to be a sustainable form of agriculture," he said. "You don't

plant a vineyard, grow it for 10 years and leave the land destroyed."

He also discovered in France that wine is "an expression of the soil that has an artistic form. You can have people taste wine from clay soil and from sandy soil, and the style of wine will reflect the soil."

The 82-acre Byington winery has only eight acres planted in Pinot Noir grapes because the remainder of the land is too steep for vineyards. The winery buys most of its grapes from other vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains and in the Sonoma area.

"In the entire Santa Cruz Mountains appellation only about 1,000 acres are planted, so you don't hear much about it in Nebraska," Sheryl says. "But if you see Santa Cruz Mountains on a bottle of wine, you know you've got a quality wine."

Byington, like other Santa Cruz Mountain wineries, is struggling with

have had to be replaced.

"Growing grapes in the Santa Cruz Mountains is a great challenge," Blackburn says, "but there is immense potential in this area."

Byington has met head-on its difficulties and surpassed them, he says. "They have a dynamic enthusiasm about the future. The fact of having survived in the Santa Cruz Mountains is a big deal because many wineries will languish and never accomplish anything, whereas Byington has set its goals and is becoming more able to achieve those goals."

According to Blackburn, the chief goal is to be a nationally distributed wine that has so high a relationship between quality and price that the wines are widely sought-after.

"In short, we're not trying to make wines with a varietal characteristic, we're trying to make wines with a vineyard characteristic, so they are a visceral expression of their particular vineyard of origin,"

## Just a taste

**WHAT:** Byington Winery tasting room

**WHERE:** 21850 Bear Creek Road, near summit

**WHEN:** Open daily 11 a.m.

-5 p.m. for tasting

**CALL:** (408) 354-1111.

*Price notes: The 1996 Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay is \$20, the Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir is \$18, and the Cabernet Sauvignon ranges from \$15 to \$22.50.*

— Carolyn Leal

he said. "The great wines of the world have something unique: a combination of the nature of the vineyard and the imprint of the technicians who make the wine."