

A very good year



Shmuel Thaler, Sentinel

Vintner J.P Pawloski says there will be fewer grapes this year, but they will be among the century's best.

Winemakers anticipate less, but great, wine

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AROMAS — A late, cold spring could mean less California wine on store shelves next year, but what does show up could be the best vintage in recent memory.

J.P Pawloski, master winemaker and owner of River Run Vintners in Aromas, said last year was the best year of the century for California wines in terms

IN DEPTH

of volume.

"This year could be the best year of the century in terms of quality, he said."

The value of the state's 1997 grape harvest was \$2.8 billion, according to the California Department of Food and Agriculture, second only to milk and cream.

Because of El Niño-powered rains during the first half of 1998, nobody is predicting a bumper crop this year, but there is optimism

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throughout the industry that it will be high-quality.

Pawloski said the late spring has caused unusually slow and uneven growth, leaving the clusters with a combination of large and small berries.

"Because of the odd weather when the plants were flowering, there will be a lot of variations," Pawloski said. "People who wait for their grapes will have an excellent year; those who push it will have uneven results."

The benefit of slow growth, according to Pawloski, is time to develop a greater percent-

age of skin. But because of the uneven maturing process, when the grapes are finally ready there will be a very short window of opportunity to get the fruit from the vines to the vats.

"The skin is what gives the wine flavor, depth and color," Pawloski said. "The trick is in the timing. I am going to have the fields lined with bins just waiting for the right moment."

The downside of this year's vintage will be lower volume, caused by a near constant battle with mold and rot from excessive moisture, along with slow growth induced by the cool weather.

Pawloski said he plans on making about a third less wine this year, and will be banking on the quality to make up the difference in volume.

That strategy has helped River Run earn a reputation for quality that is backed up by sev-

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eral awards. In April, River Run was awarded a gold medal for Best New World Merlot at the New World Wine competition in Riverside, beating out vintages from North and South America and Australia.

Dan Lee, owner of Morgan Winery in the Salinas Valley, concurs with Pawloski, and said uneven ripening patterns and mildew problems have complicated the wine grower's life this year. "The bloom-time

weather was pretty cool for the most part," Lee said. "The set was a little off. There are good cluster counts but the weight per cluster will be down a bit. I think most people are looking at yields being 10 to 20 percent lower than normal."

"Considering all the terrible weather we've had, I think we are sitting pretty good right now," said Greg Stokes, vineyard manager for David Bruce Winery in the Santa Cruz Mountains. "People are a little bit nervous but there's nothing to really be nervous about unless the

actual storm clouds start forming."

According to Stokes, by the time the 1998 vintage is safely fermenting, local vintners could be amply rewarded for enduring the trials and tribulations brought on by El Niño.

Outstanding 1998 wines to look for include chardonnay, pinot noir, merlot and petite sirah, said Pamela Storrs, co-owner of Storrs Winery. "Given the long hang time, almost everything should have developed incredible flavor, especially the chardonnay," Storrs said.