

Wineries

# Local wineries cautious on crop

## While other area growers are beaming, slow maturing grapes here await test

By Scott Grant

While other wine growers in the state are hailing this year as one of the most profitable on record, officials of local grape-growing wineries are taking a more cautious approach.

That's because growing grapes in the Santa Cruz mountains is a more risky operation, said officials of Felton-Empire Vineyards and Dick Smothers' Vine Hill Wines. This is one of the coolest grape-growing areas in the state, and the fruit takes longer to ripen.

But the wait, they say, is well worth it.

"The growing season is longer," said Bill Gibbs, sales manager for Felton-Empire Vineyards on Felton-Empire Road in Felton. "It takes the grapes longer to mature, but it's a process of maturation that yields excellent balance." The resulting wines have "more concentration and character," he said.

The villain is rain, which comes into play inconveniently at this time of year — just when the grapes are ripening.

Smothers' vineyard on Vine Hill Road near Scotts Valley beat the rains this year — but just barely. The grapes "got ripe late," said the owner and former comedian. "We just had to hang on."

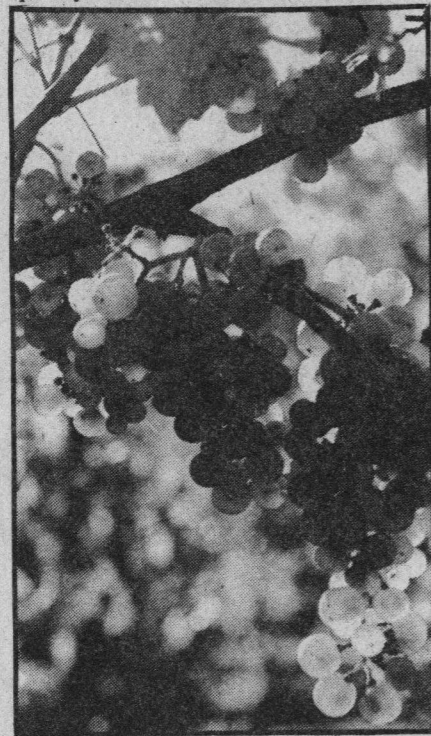
Smothers was rewarded with the biggest harvest the winery has experienced since 1974. The local grapes will yield 250 cases of red chardonnay and 500 cases of white reisling. With

more than 17 tons of grapes harvested, Smothers is pleased with the quality produced this year by his 12-acre hillside vineyard.

"In a hotter climate there's no problem getting the grapes ripe, but sometimes they ripen too quick. If hot weather were all that mattered, all the vineyards would be in Lodi."

Still, he said, quality was difficult to judge before the final product is up.

"Nobody can say much about quality until it's in the barrel," added



Gibbs. And at his vineyard, the grapes haven't even been picked yet. The downpour last Thursday could be a blessing in disguise, he said.

Hot weather between now and picking time could cause a favorable kind of mold to form on the grapes, concentrating their flavor. Nevertheless, "It's a little nerve-wracking" considering the possible consequences of rain.

Felton-Empire's reislings are scheduled to be harvested Monday. The vineyard's chardonnay will be picked even later.

"This year we have every indication that the grapes will be very high-quality," Gibbs said. "But until the grapes are crushed and in the barrel you don't know."

"Short of some sort of natural disaster, things look very good to excellent. We're not quite there, but every indication is that it will come out real good for us."

What has made this year good is consistent, hot weather. Dramatic changes, the growers said, upset the ripening process.

"If you get some goofy weather pattern you're behind the eight ball," Gibbs said. "You can take all the special care, do the pruning and cropping, but nature plays the rest."

"We're very cautious about our practices," he continued. "And usually caution pays off."

"It's a very tricky business," Smothers added. "You never know."

# Scotts Valley Banner

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Boxes of stems and pump rest alongside the Felton-Empire vineyard. Crushing machine is visible at left.