

# Vines at Felton Empire winery date back to the '30s

By JEFF HUDSON

**W**ine lovers can relax. Felton-Empire Vineyards, overlooking the San Lorenzo River, sustained no damage during last month's flooding.

The winery, founded in 1939, is set securely into a well-drained hillside. It was built by Chaffee Hall, who was so impressed with one of the wineries he saw in France that he sketched out the design. Upon his return to California, Hall took some time

away from his duties as corporate counsel to such companies as Southern Pacific and Safeway, and built his own winery in Felton, modeled on the French design.

Hallcrest Vineyards, as it was known, continued until Hall's death in the 1960s. For a number of years the winery was inactive, and the grapes were sold to other wine makers. In 1976 the winery was reopened under the Felton-Empire name.

Felton-Empire has some 10 acres of White Riesling and five acres of Cabernet vines adjoining the winery, the vines dating from '39. They also have a new vineyard

in Boony Doon that includes several other varieties, and they draw grapes from such far-flung sources as Mendocino and Santa Barbara Counties.

"Specifically, we look for hillside, dry-farmed, coastal vineyards," says Stephan Bedford of the winery staff. "Dry farming produces fewer grapes, but the fruit's of a higher quality."

Felton-Empire releases some 15,000 cases annually, a figure that represents the maximum capacity of the winery. Further expansion is not planned at present.

White wines make up about 70 percent of Felton-Empire's

releases, including such popular varieties as Chardonnay, Chenin Blanc, Gewurztraminer. Felton-Empire is particularly proud of its several White Rieslings, coming from different vineyards and done in different styles. Some are dry, others are sweet late-harvest wines.

The reds include Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel. Felton-Empire will also join the quest to produce a great California Pinot Noir with its upcoming release of six different bottlings.

All of the releases are varietals, even the non-alcoholic grape juice (made from Zinfandel). Wines

from specific vineyards are so labeled, while the wines from several coastal sources are released under the "Maritime Series" name.

Felton-Empire takes a "state of the art" approach to wine making, according to Bedford. They are very proud of their Willmes bladder-type press (made in Germany), and their extensive lab equipment. They analyze not only the acids and sugars, but also the enzymatic activity in the wine. Fermentation temperatures are closely monitored. It is, Bedford says, the "very scientific attitude"

toward wine making that makes Felton's wines what they are.

The winery uses both American and French oak cooperage, with fermentation in stainless steel.

Felton-Empire also urges consumers to bottle-age most of its wines for at least a year after purchase, the whites as well as the reds. "Our whites are made to develop very well in the bottle," says Bedford. "Some of the late-harvest wines will keep on going right into the next century."

Felton-Empire is open most weekends for afternoon tasting, but it's best to call ahead at 335-3939.



# Time for wine

Stephan Bedford at Felton  
Empire hillside winery, a  
successful blend of older  
plantings and the latest  
technology.

Photo by Kurt Ellison

