

Santa Cruz County Vintners

David Bruce Winery Is Local, Really!

This is the last in a series of articles on wineries in Santa Cruz County.

By DENISE SIEBENTHAL
Sentinel Staff Writer

The David Bruce Winery on Bear Creek Road suffers somewhat of an identity crisis.

Because of its summit area location, many people don't associate the large winery with Santa Cruz County, explained Winemaker Steve Millier. But the 25,000 gallons of wine produced by David Bruce Winery yearly call this county their home.

"We have a Los Gatos mailing address, but we really are in Santa Cruz County," Millier explained. "We are out of the mainstream of Santa Cruz, so people don't really associate us with Santa Cruz County."

A drive up to David Bruce Winery emphasizes the fact that this winery sits on top of the world, with a splendid view of the Santa Clara Valley to one side of the road and an expansive vista of the Santa Cruz Mountains and the San Lorenzo Valley to the other side.

Another reason county residents might not be too familiar with this winery is because not many of David Bruce wines are sold locally.

"We've had a hard time getting established locally," Millier explained. "It's hard getting someone to go around the local area to market our wines. My wife presently is going around to local stores and she's found people are really receptive to local products."

About half of the wines from David Bruce Winery go out of state. Of the other half, most is distributed in Northern California and a small portion is shipped to Southern California.

While the day-to-day operation of the winery is run by Millier and his assistant, Janet Pagano, the winery actually

is owned by Dr. David Bruce, a San Jose dermatologist.

"He (Bruce) actually got started in 1959 making wine at home. He made 11 gallons of concord grape wine then and that just wasn't enough. He soon was making 200 gallons and eventually got bonded," Millier explained.

Bruce located his home and winery at 21439 Bear Creek Road in 1961 not only to be close to his San Jose practice, but also because the soil and climatic conditions in the area were good for grape growing, Millier explained.

Before Bruce located on Bear Creek Road, he owned a Zinfandel vineyard off Jarvis Road in Soquel (now the Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyards owned by Ken Burnap.) But he moved because he desired more space and an area where grapes would ripen quicker, Millier related.

Moving his family to the summit area, Bruce then planted 25 acres of mostly Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes. Smaller plots of White Riesling and Cabernet Sauvignon also were planted.

In 1964, the winery became bonded and in 1968, Bruce built a 6,000-square-foot concrete block winery which is easily spotted from Bear Creek Road.

It's in this large, modern building that tours are conducted each Saturday from 11 a.m. until around 3 p.m. Millier prefers that those wishing to take the tour make reservations in advance by calling 354-4214, but a reservation isn't required.

It's also in this large building that one of the more unusual aspects of this winery is found. About 450 barrels filled with aging wine hang by metal brackets along the full length of the walls.

Because of the weight of these barrels, the roof of the winery had to be specially constructed to counterbalance

the inward pull of the walls, Millier pointed out.

"When there's any kind of earthquake, we go running," Pagano laughed.

The winery was constructed in this unusual manner because Bruce originally envisioned doing everything in the building from crushing to bottle aging. With the wine hanging in barrels on the walls, there would be plenty of room left in the middle of the building for bottle aging, Bruce figured.

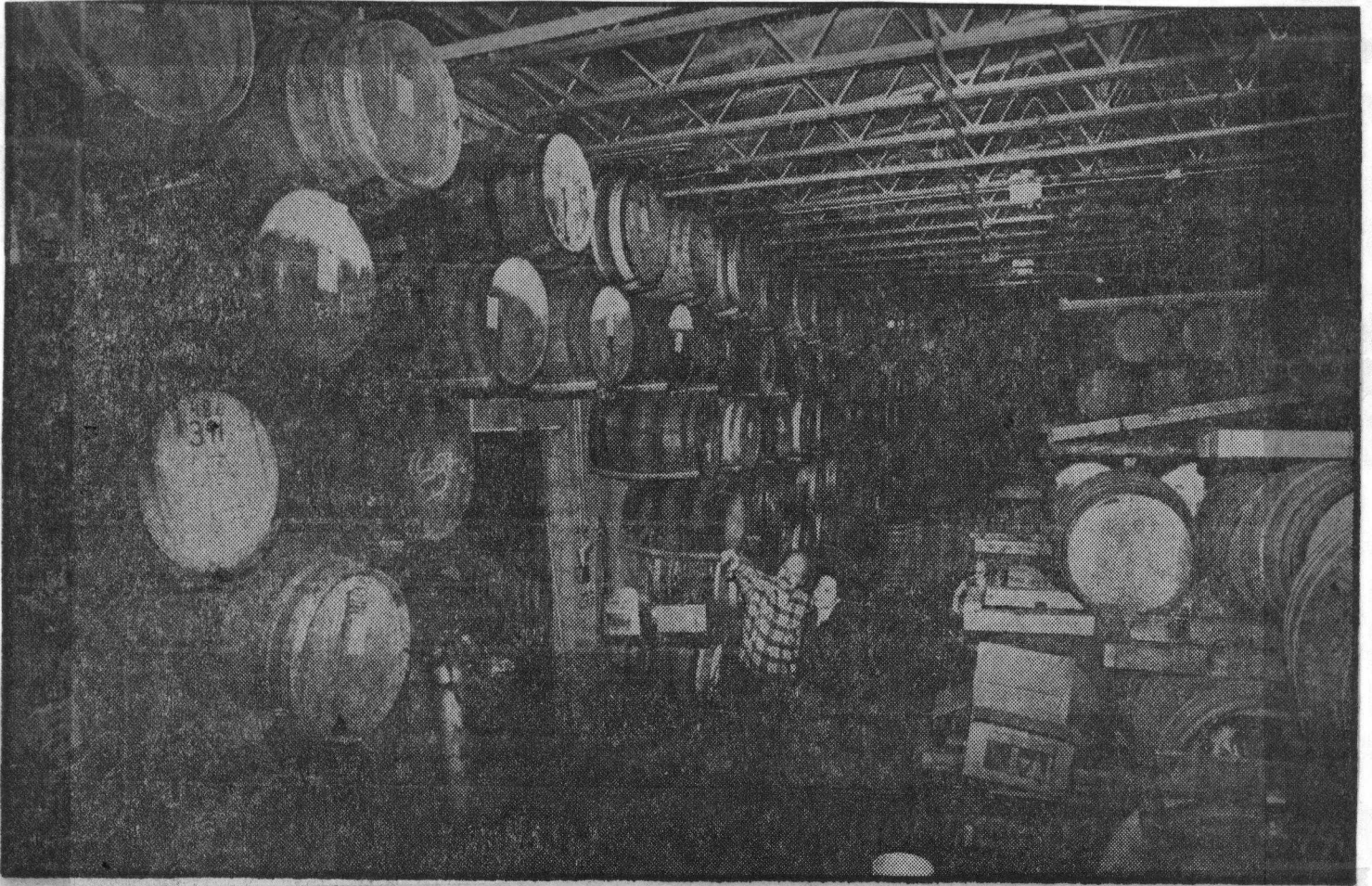
But when he designed the winery, Bruce didn't ever envision that he'd be making 25,000 gallons someday. Now, every inch of floor space in the cavernous building is filled with barrels of aging wine and the bottle aging has to take place in San Jose, Millier explained.

The vineyards bordering the winery produce only about 20 percent of the grapes needed for the 25,000 gallons made each year. The remainder needed are purchased from outside the county, mainly from San Luis Obispo and Mendocino, according to Millier.

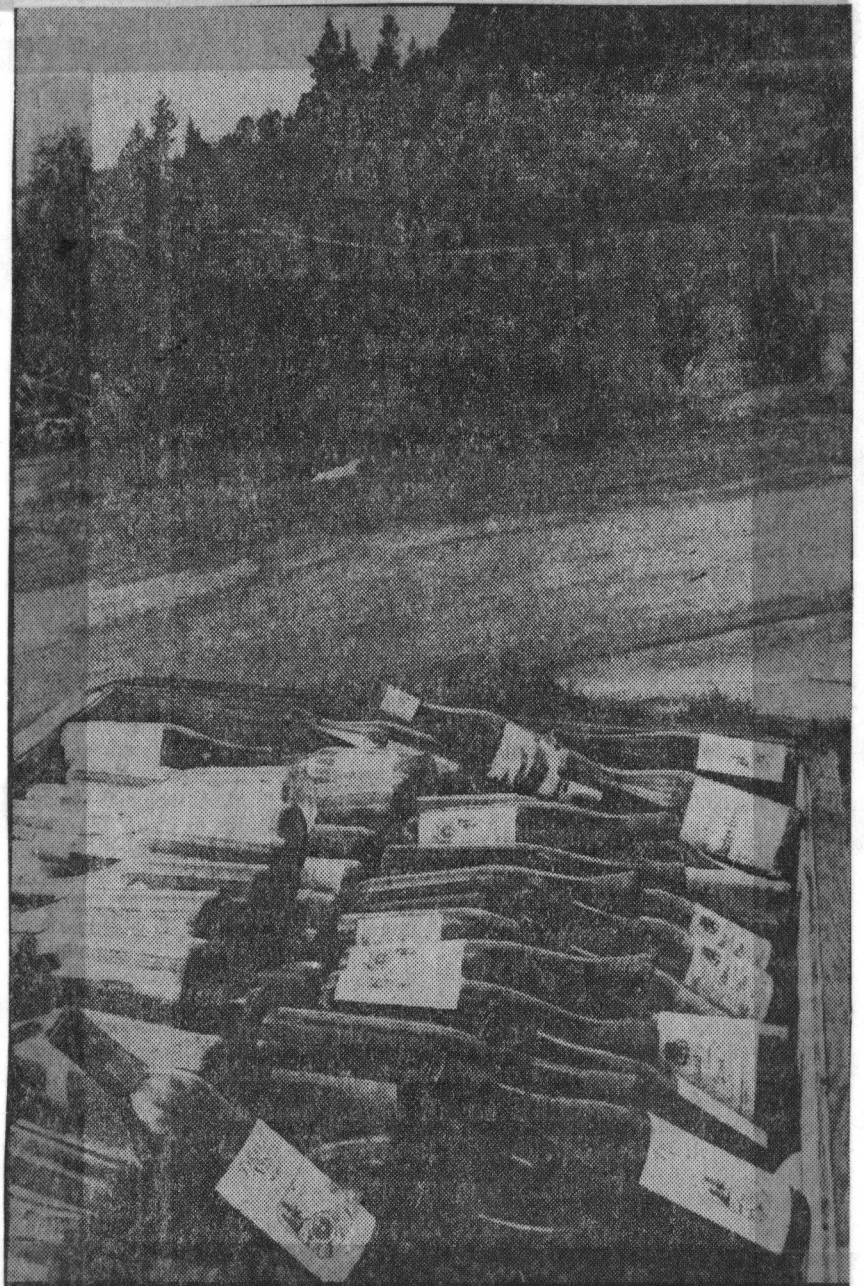
The wines made at David Bruce Winery would be described by wine aficionados as having intense flavor, Millier added. This is what he believes sets David Bruce apart from most wineries in the area.

"We strive to bring out the individual character of each wine we make. We try to push each wine to its maximum so we get the most intense flavor possible in the wine."

David Bruce wines once had a reputation of being rather expensive, but Millier said that has changed some. "At one time, we were very expensive, but our prices have stayed the same for a long time so now we are about average for a small winery producing quality wines. I guess most of the other small wineries have just caught up with us."



Some 450 barrels are stored along the wall at David Bruce Winery



Wine bottles wait to be picked up for recycling