

Time for wine

Constant challenge

in the vineyard

By MARYBETH VARCADOS

A VITICULTURIST sends his grapes out in the world just as a parent sends his children, hoping for success and watching to see if his nurturing will yield rewards.

Fred Pierce sends his Gewurztraminer grapes off to the vintner's in early autumn and, like other grape growers, waits anxiously for the verdict. Last year's vintage produced a fine wine with a hint of effervescence and the delicate taste of the distinguished white grape, bringing rave comments from a Gallo executive who was visiting in the Larson Road neighborhood, off Trout Gulch in Aptos.

"Dry white wines taste nearly the same sometimes," says Pierce. "But this has a flavor all its own." He swirled the delicate amber liquid in its glass, admiring its clearness.

Six years ago, Pierce planted a hillside acre in the area once thought to have been cultivated by

Continuing series

the early Spaniards. Last year's crop, almost a ton and a half of grapes, yielded enough juice for 15 cases of 12 bottles each. This year, he hopes to get up to 2½ tons.

Another four acres are under cultivation at the FARM Vineyard, named for Pierce and his wife (Fred And Rosemarie). With Rudy Pedulla in Watsonville and Tom Kruse in Gilroy making his wines, Pierce, a salesman for Farmers Insurance, is optimistic about his supplementary-income venture.

He and Chuck Smith, a neighbor, go in together, selling their crops to Kruse. "The winemaker is the key to good wine," noted Pierce, whose vintages are fermented in glass jugs. "And if the grape performs for the winemaker, he'll pay a good price for it."

Pierce uprooted an apple orchard to plant the disease-resistant root stock brought from Napa Valley. To get them started, he

used a nitrogen-rich fertilizer.

He had experimented with avocados, like many of his neighbors, and kiwi fruit, but settled on grapes, planting the white "Gewurz" upon advice from the Monterey County farm advisor, Rudy Naja, and from Soquel vintner Larry Bargetto.

"This is sort of a local banana belt," he said, referring to the hilly area where frosts are rare and sun is plentiful. "Besides, I prefer white wines — reds attack my stomach — and they are a good seller."

Juice from Gewurztraminers grown on the northern California coast sells for about \$720 a ton or more, if the sugar content is high, he said, making them a worthwhile investment. When the hydrometer reads between 23 and 24 for sugar content, the Pierces and their friends pick the grapes, a chore that takes a half day late in September. Fred and Rosemarie do all their own work, with ample help from their three sons — Garrett, who comes home when possible from Navy duty in San Diego, and Cal and Brent, athletes at Aptos High.

The vineyard is watered three times each growing season, with the hose. "It takes me eight hours," said Cal, who's on the Mariners' track team this spring.

Pierce, of course, is most interested in getting a maximum yield. "I read that UC-Davis has experimented with heavy watering, getting yields up to six tons an acre. That remains something to experiment with," noted Pierce, an ex-Navy submarine man who has been in the insurance business for 15 years. But inflation's bite on business has slowed down "the procedure of finishing the vineyard."

The winter storms have not been kind, either. In January, a landslide carved away his land, stopping just six inches from the young vines. Two years ago, the entire crop was lost to the weather. Hot weather, following a cold summer, took the grapes into

early dormancy. "You must watch the vines carefully, for mold," he cautions.

Nature continually challenges a grower, Pierce knows. In quiet moments he soaks in the pastoral beauty and talks to the vines ("I tell them — 'Grow' "). Other times, he must wage war, against the gophers. One year, he killed nearly 300 of the critters, setting 16 traps at a time. Any new plants are going in underground baskets,

he vows. The deer, too, take gourmet pleasure in the new buds, which meant building a fence around the vineyard.

Has he advice for beginners?

"Have a hell of a lot of money," he grinned. "And the spare time to devote to it. A poor man can't start a vineyard. But if I had it to do over again, I'd plant 20 acres. The potential is there to make a living off grapes in this county."

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REFERENCE

WATSONVILLE
REGISTER-PAJARONIAN
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Photo by Sam Vestal

Fruit of their labors pleases Fred Pierce and son Cal.