

# Felton-Empire Vineyards enjoys a golden year

By Jim Ames

Although it's been in operation just two years, Felton-Empire Vineyards is already making quite a name for itself.

The winery is located just above Felton, off of Felton-Empire road. The vineyards next to the winery are a familiar sight for drivers coming down the hill towards Felton on Mt. Hermon road, with the golden grape leaves of autumn particularly striking.

That's not the only gold that's been produced by the people at Felton-Empire, however. The small winery recently was awarded two gold medals at the 1978 Los Angeles County Fair wine judging, one of the industry benchmarks.

Much of the credit for this success belongs to Leo McCloskey, winemaker at the Felton-Empire operation, and a co-

owner of the winery along with John Pollard and Jim Beauregard.

McCloskey is also a consultant for other wineries, and is manager of the increasingly well known Smothers Winery of Scotts Valley, established by Dick Smothers of the Smothers Brothers television show.

A recent article in the San Francisco Examiner had this to say about McCloskey's work, in an article about the Los Angeles County Fair wine competition:

"This year's blazing new light is Leo McCloskey, winemaker at both Felton-Empire and its neighbor, Smothers.

"McCloskey won a bronze (Smothers Late Harvest Johannisberg 1977), a silver (Smothers Chardonnay 1977), three golds (Felton-Empire White Riesling 1977, Felton-Empire Late Harvest White

Riesling 1977, and Smothers Late Harvest Gewurztraminer 1977), along with the Sweepstakes Award for the last-named of these wines.

"Considering he didn't have much—if anything—else to enter, and was competing in four of the toughest classes in the field, that ain't bad work."

An article in the Los Angeles Times also spoke of McCloskey's work, and mentioned Felton-Empire's success.

McCloskey and Pollard talked about the successes of Felton-Empire's product recently, and were plainly proud of what has been achieved in such a short time.

The great bulk of the winery's output is in only two wines, white riesling and cabernet sauvignon.

Because red wines take longer before they can be bottled, the first of Felton-



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Empire's cabernet won't be on the market until early next year.

For nearly two years it has been resting quietly in stacks of oak barrels in the basement of the winery.

The care that the winery put into selecting the barrels it uses for its cabernet is just one example of the striving for perfection that marks the work at Felton-Empire.

As McCloskey walks along the row of barrels, stacked from floor to ceiling along one whole wall, he can give you the life story of each barrel.

Pointing to one, he said, "This was bought in 1976 and used later in the year." The wood to build the barrel is American white oak from Wisconsin. The wood was air dried for 30 months and then coopered in Arkansas for the winery.

Another barrel he pointed to is a converted 10-year-old whiskey barrel that had its insides shaved out. A big barrel that came from France is the only barrel of that particular wood in the United States.

The winery is experimenting as it goes along, and McCloskey is closely watching how the wine reacts to different sizes of barrels and different types of wood.

The white wine doesn't go into barrels. It is kept in refrigerated stainless steel tanks for several months while it ferments, then is bottled.

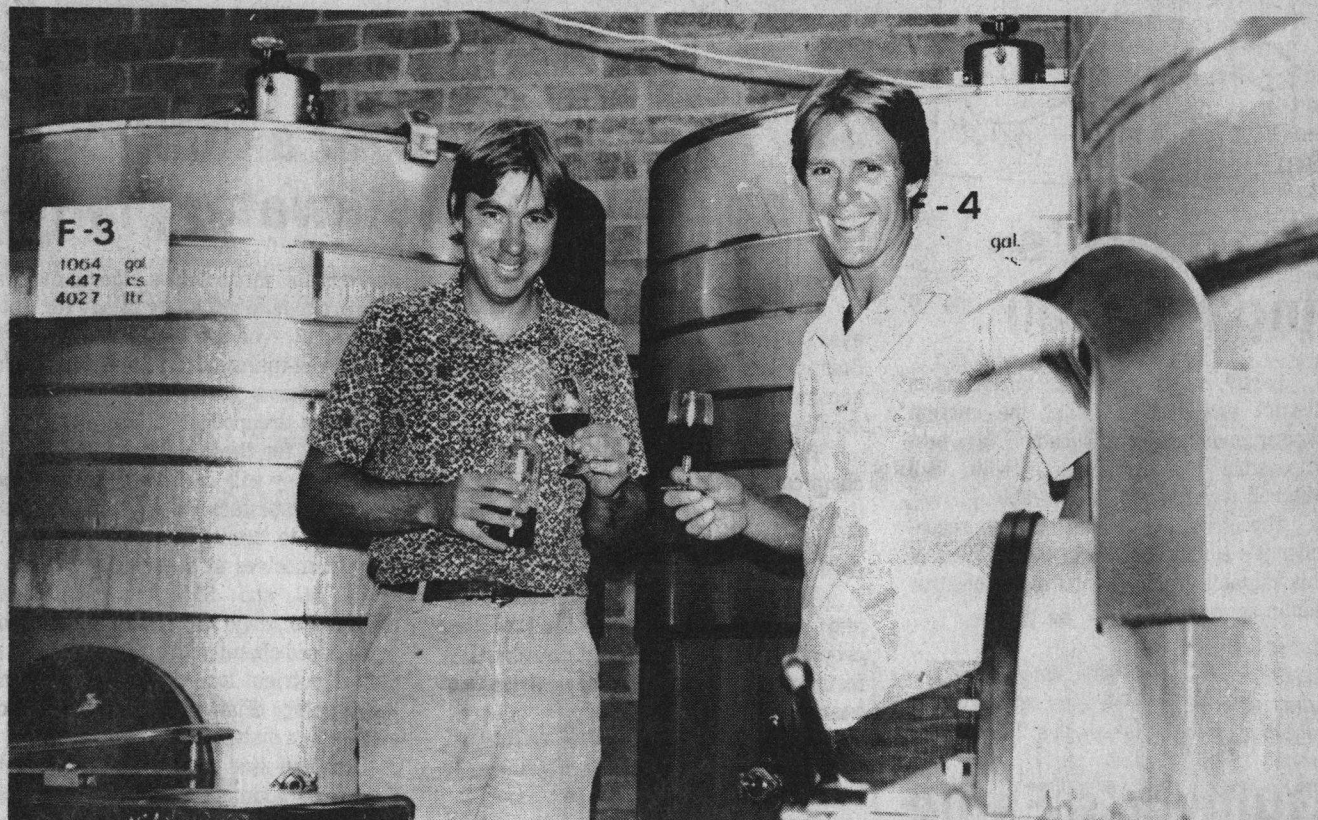
McCloskey and Pollard said that the Santa Cruz mountains area is the best location in the state for certain wines.

"They're the best. I don't think anyone would disagree with that, even the people in Sonoma County," said Pollard.

Only a part of Felton-Empire's grapes come from this area, including those from the Hallcrest Vineyard by the winery and from 15 acres of vineyard in Bonny Doon area owned by Beauregard.

The winery is making plans to obtain more and more of its supply of grapes from Santa Cruz County.

Among advantages of this area are that it is colder at night, which helps produce the grapes of smaller size which are so important for high quality. "The



Leo McCloskey, left, and John Pollard sample their product.



Closkey.

He is interested in producing wines along the tradition of the German winemakers, and the cooler Santa Cruz County climate helps make this possible.

McCloskey's interest extended into his "vacation" time recently when he took a trip to Germany, and spent most of his time checking out the operations of his counterparts there.

"I couldn't get myself into enough wineries," he said.

In the years that he has been involved with the wine business, McCloskey has picked up a few closely-guarded techniques

which he says helps Felton-Empire produce its fine product.

Among these trade secrets is the procedure for bottling the red wine without filtering it, something that is not often done because of the danger that bacteria can destroy the wine.

If you want to taste the cabernet sauvignon when it does reach the market,

be prepared to pay a healthy sum for the pleasure you'll receive. McCloskey says some of the reds will go for \$10 to \$15 a bottle.

If you're into speculating, though, you might do well to pick up a few bottles. He estimates that in 10 years it could be worth twice as much—after the wine has had a chance to become perfectly aged.



**Will these rapidly ripening grapes growing on the hillside above Felton bring the Felton-Empire Vineyards another gold medal?**