

Supervisors OK winery rules

By JAMIE MARKS

Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz County's wineries are small compared with their more famous cousins in the Napa Valley, but local vintners hope to bring a wine renaissance to the area.

To help bring on this new age in wine development county supervisors put into law a set of regulations guiding winery operations.

On an unanimous vote, supervisors passed amendments to the general plan and county code calling for the encouragement of winery development and recognizing the county as a "unique area suited for the growing of premium-quality wine grapes."

"This county over the years has developed a very fine reputation for wine production," said Dexter Ahlgren at a public hearing Tuesday.

Ahlgren and his wife run a small winery

north of Boulder Creek. As a member of the Winery Policy Development Committee, Ahlgren was instrumental in guiding the rules into law.

Ahlgren told supervisors that before Prohibition, Santa Cruz County was ranked with the likes of Napa and Sonoma counties in wine reputation, if not production.

Now, he said, "We're just a drop in the bucket."

The 20 wineries in the county produce some 200,000 to 250,000 gallons of wine annually, compared with the statewide yield of 300 million gallons, he said.

And, despite ideal climate conditions for growing varietal grapes for such wines as the Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, the vast majority of local wineries import grapes from other counties, he said.

For example, Jim Bargetto, part owner of Bargetto Winery in Soquel, said earlier

his winery imports all its grapes.

According to Bargetto, before Prohibition some 3,000 acres of county land was turned over to grape growing.

Now the estimates are as low as 200 acres, partly because of the high price of land.

Bargetto said one reason the winery committee was formed two years ago was that new wineries in the past 10 years had found confusion in the county's rules. Were they agricultural or commercial entities? How were they to be regulated?

The result was that the committee proposed five levels of regulation, covering wineries that produce less than 1,000 gallons annually, wineries that produce up to 20,000 gallons, those that produce up to 50,000 gallons, those that produce up to 100,000 gallons and those above.

The committee's recommendations were adopted without change by the Board of Supervisors.