

S.C. Mountain grapes now carry official title

By JEFF HUDSON

SINCE NOVEMBER, it's been official. The Santa Cruz Mountains are now recognized by the federal government as an official, distinct wine-growing region. Henceforward, only wine made from grapes grown in the higher parts of these mountains can carry the appellation "Santa Cruz Mountains." Official appellations are granted by the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF).

Paradoxically, of the officially recognized California wine-growing regions, the area covered by the Santa Cruz Mountains appellation is one of the largest — and one of the smallest.

It is one of the largest in that it covers tens of thousands of acres in Santa Cruz, San Mateo and Santa

One of a series

Clara counties — encompassing most of the hills and ridges between Half Moon Bay and Hecker Pass.

But this vast area includes only a few hundred acres of vineyards, producing an extremely limited quantity of highly sought-after wine.

The area covered by the appellation runs roughly from Watsonville to Half Moon Bay, covering vineyards above 400 feet in elevation on the coastal side, and those above 600 or 800 feet on the inland slopes.

What makes it a distinct wine-growing region? Different wine makers seem to agree that there are two major factors. Leo McCloskey of Felton-Empire Vineyards points to "the heavy maritime influence. It's a European-type climate. And the grapes come from dry-farmed mountain vines in well-drained soil. You get low yields (of fruit). It gives you bigger wines with well-defined varietal character."

Ken Burnap of Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyards agrees that the marine influence is important. "This is one of the coolest areas that is considered proper for grapes." By comparison, he says, Napa and Sonoma counties, and even the Hecker Pass area near Gilroy, experience much hotter summer temperatures than the mountain vineyards.

Dave Bennion of Ridge Vineyards in Los Gatos points out another factor. "Ours is purely a mountain appellation. Most appellations are centered on a valley and go up. Ours is centered on the top and goes down to minimal altitudes, cut off by major roads on the north and south."

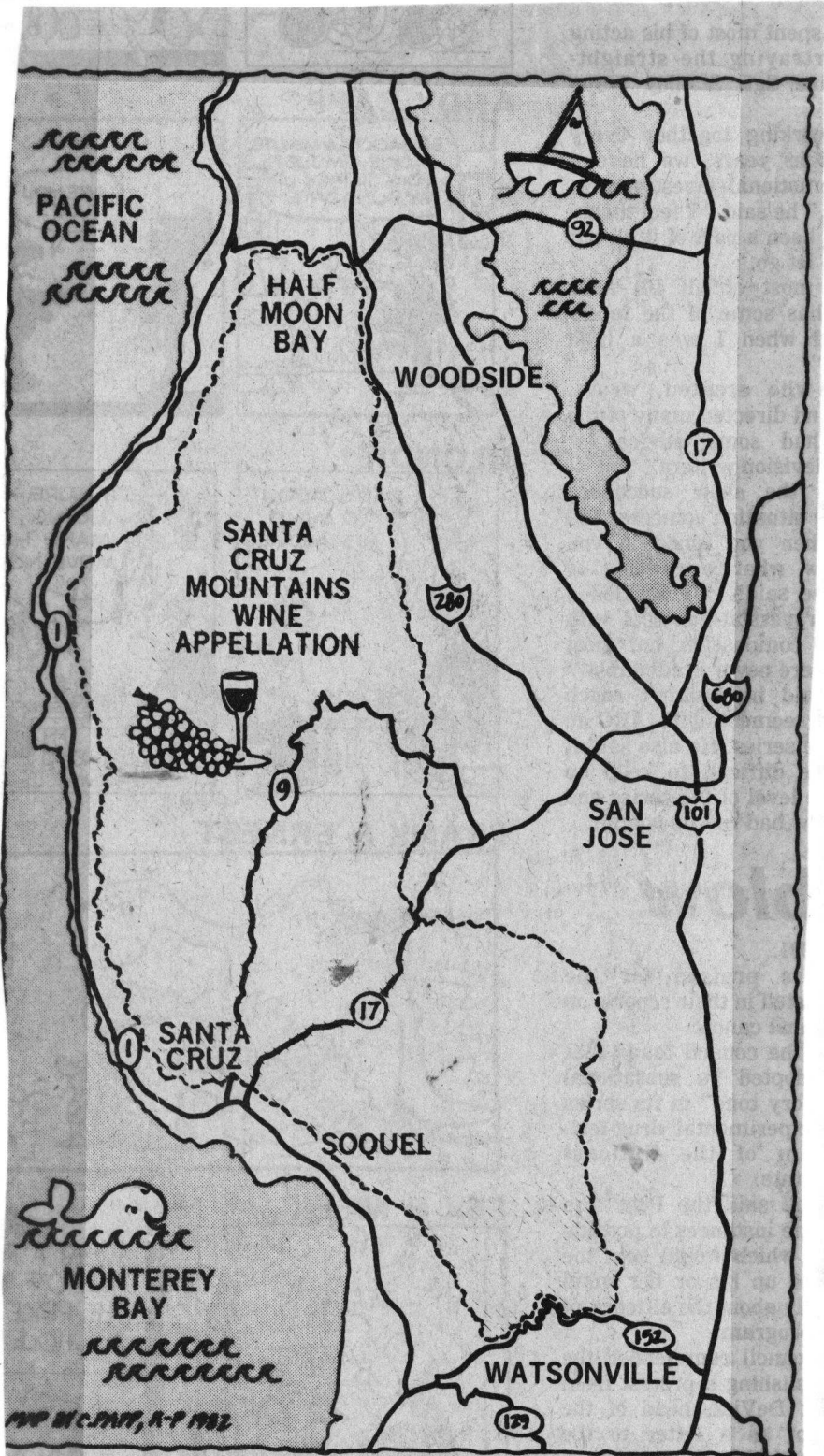
The Santa Cruz Mountains appellation isn't entirely new — according to Burnap, it's been in use "since the late 1800s." But previously the boundaries of the appellation had been undefined, and there was no legal requirement as to the percentage of Santa Cruz Mountain grapes that went into the wine.

Starting this year, any wine bearing the appellation must be at least 95 percent from Santa Cruz Mountain grapes. "We felt it would help put it in perspective for people who are interested in the mountains as a wine region," says Bennion, who was on the committee of wine makers that petitioned for the appellation. "It adds a little more credibility to the mountains as an area for growing very fine wine grapes."

Although the acreage covered by the appellation is presently sparse, it would be doubled if the Bonny Doon Vineyard proposed by Jim Beauregard receives final planning approval. That project has been delayed for some time due to a bitter controversy over the Bonny Doon wallflower, a rare wildflower that grows on the site of the proposed vineyard.

The Santa Cruz Mountains appellation does not include any of the vineyards associated with the Hecker Pass Wineries. Ken Burnap says, "We tried to stay with boundaries that encompassed that part of the mountains that had a related uniqueness." The Hecker pass vineyards, located on mostly level valley land west of Gilroy and Morgan Hill, were inevitably outside the boundaries of the mountain appellation. "Hecker Pass has a very distinctive character of its own — they make some very fine wines, unique to their own area. They should apply for an appellation of their own."

Other Central California areas that have applied for or already received official appellations are the Edna Valley (near San Luis Obispo) and the Lime Kiln area of San Benito County.



Time for wine