

Nicasio expanding from caves to grape cultivation

By MARYBETH VARCADOS

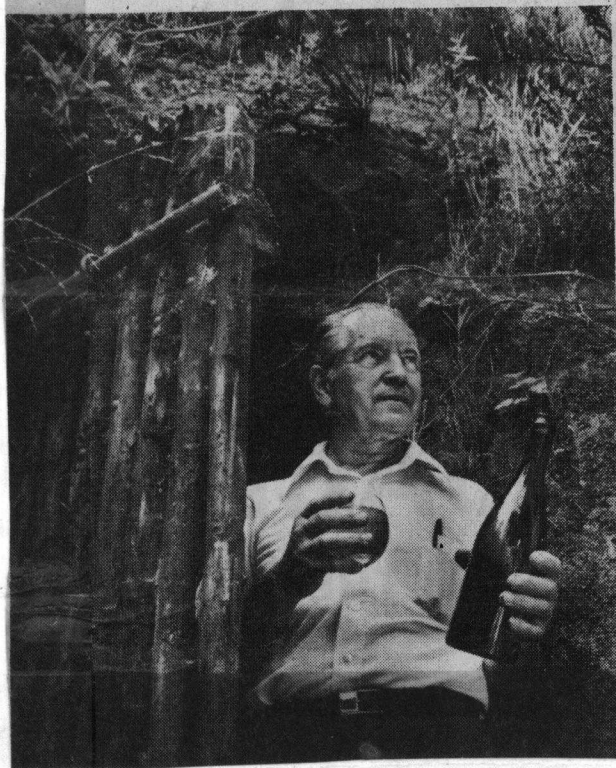
AFTER 30 YEARS of making wines in Santa Cruz mountain caves where you'd expect to find trolls and hobbits sipping heady brews, Dan Wheeler is about to expand his wine-making ventures to what he calls "Sky Island," 173 acres at a 3,500-foot altitude in Lake County.

"I have great enthusiasm about it," says the self-proclaimed "patriarch of small wineries." His Nicasio Winery has attracted customers internationally with nary an advertisement, no brochures and only direct sales. With current volume production between 700 and 1,000 gallons a year, Wheeler looks to a gradual expansion, maintaining production at its present level next year while he gets established in the northerly clime, then a 20 percent increase in ensuing years.

We sat at a picnic table at the entrance to Wheeler's caves one afternoon as the sun went lower and lower in the west. Since the severe winter storms nearly washed out the roads leading to Old San Jose Road behind Soquel, the winery is nearly stranded on its knoll. The caves were untouched by torrents of water that gushed by them, guarding their barrels of liquid treasure under six feet of sandstone — where the 62-degree temperature varies just two degrees in a year.

Wheeler dug the caves himself, hauling the dirt out in wheelbarrows; while going no wider than 12 feet,

In mossy caves he carved from the sandstone in hills behind Soquel 30 years ago, Dan Wheeler keeps his limited vintages. Soon, he'll grow Pinot Noir grapes in Lake County, too.



he probed far into the hill. Bare light bulbs light the interiors, showing rows upon stacked rows of bottles in the bonded cellar and a spacious cavern around a six-foot-thick central post in another chamber.

Ironically, he said, heavy winter rains such as we had this year could actually be ideal for grape growers. He believes in heavy irrigation of crops early in the growing season and "stressing" as harvest time approaches, to bring out the sugars.

There were no interruptions as we tasted, first, an almost amber 1973 Reisling, then the unusual Zinfandel Rose, also a '73, and finally a mellow Cabernet. He also makes a Chardonnay and — although it's all gone now — "au naturel" champagne which cost \$18. His wines usually cost around \$9, although the Cabernet, in its gold collar and purple ribbon, is aged longer than the usual five years and costs \$16. His wines are not sold until they are 3½ to 7 years old.

"I was making organic wines before they invented the word," the quiet-spoken vintner commented. In fact, his entire operation is what you'd call organic — from the old-time crusher, a corker bought years ago from Weibel Winery, the wooden press he still uses, and the caves, "fur-lined" with clumps of dark mold. That's why the Wheeler label shows a human hand (representing "handmade") in front of the rustic cellar door.

"If I'd had to make a living making wine, I couldn't have done what I did," observed Wheeler, a northern-Montana-born mountain man and radio technician from World War II. When he began digging his caves (summer of 1952), many small wineries were dying in California. Why? First of all, he thinks, because the owners tried to make their living solely from wine-making, and, second, because they tried to compete with the "middle"-size wineries, like Mirassou (which, he thinks, is not practical).

He just wanted to be far from civilization, for his target practice, and to have an airstrip to land his plane on. On this rustic terrain, he has gone through two marriages and reared five children (two adopted).

The carcasses of 26 Corvairs of various ages and forms dot the land now — sources of parts when he needs them, for Wheeler considers the Corvair the Pouilly Fuisse of American automobiles. He divides his time between the cars, his caves, his engineering work in the Santa Clara Valley and his plans for the new vineyards.

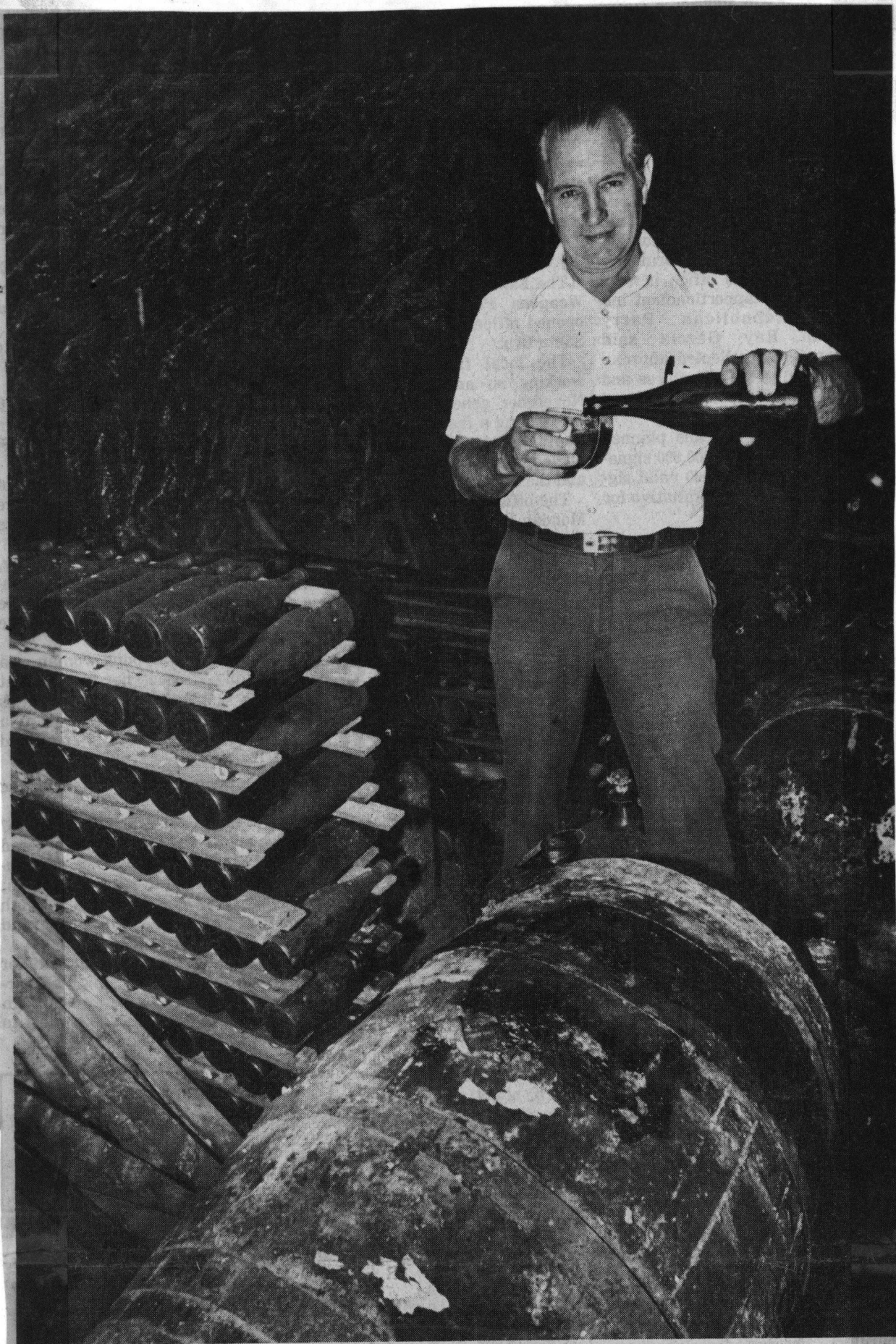
He buys his grapes, most mountain-grown from Bonny Doon and some from the Salinas Valley. The ideal is to buy the complete harvest of a small grower, he said, so if especially fine wine is produced, he has it all. That's what makes good wine valuable — rareness and the amount available, he pointed out.

Wheeler, who once took a short course in agriculture at the University of Montana in Bozeman, believes in aging wines. His are kept for an intermediate 1½ years of slow aging in five-gallon glass carboys before going into the wooden barrels for a gradual oxidation, and finally into bottles. Sulfur dioxide as a sterilizing agent is added just once, at the beginning. This "European style" fermentation, he thinks, results in the wines that bring his repeat customers; he sells almost 100 percent of his production. At crushing time, he hires a person or two to help, although one year he did the job himself.

70:5 SOQUEL DRIVE
LAKE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA 95003

REFERENCE

WATSONVILLE
REGISTER-PAJARONIAN
May 22, 1982



His hopes now rest on "Sky Island," and he has found someone in whom, he also hopes, he can pass on what he's learned. Three other vineyards are going in (replacing orchards) near his new property where the "microclimate" is ideal for grapes (sunny all day, but cool) and the deep soil is a permeable mix of shale and sand over a high winter water table. Here, he hopes, he will grow quality Pinot Noir grapes, the first essential for a fine wine. After the grapes, what counts is an experienced winemaker and predictable storage conditions, such as his caves.

**Time
for wine**