

Santa Cruz Mountain winemakers can thank Mother Nature for this year's bountiful grape crop

By Shannon Burkey, for Silicon Valley Community Newspapers

Winemakers in the Santa Cruz Mountains are celebrating as the 2013 harvest season winds down. The last of the grapes are being picked and the vine-to-barrel process is well under way, with many saying this harvest could be one for the record books.

"This is the best harvest we've ever had. It's been absolutely great, just awesome," said Dave Moulton, owner and winemaker at Burrell School Vineyards in Los Gatos. "It's something that everyone is going to be talking about for years."

Vineyards throughout the mountains are seeing vines that are producing a higher number of clusters that are also larger than normal, making winemakers and wine aficionados giddy with anticipation for the products that will come from this year's fruit.

"Last year, 2012, has been written up quite a bit as the best [harvest] in all of California in the last 50 years," Moulton said, "and this year is exceeding last year."

At Burrell School, Moulton said that the yields this year on the nine varietals he grows are up roughly 30 percent from last year for the same number of plants. And in some cases, as with his cabernet franc, this year's yield is a 45 percent increase over last year. To put those numbers in perspective, Moulton said last year was a good year where he saw his yields up 10 percent from normal.

Moulton isn't the only one seeing these types of results.

"Everyone I've talked to has had the same experience this year. We've never seen anything like it," said Moulton, who is the president of the 74-member Santa Cruz Mountains Winegrowers Association. "I haven't talked to Napa and Sonoma yet, but I'm sure they are seeing similar results."

Mary Lindsay, co-owner of Los Gatos' Muns Vineyards and president of the Viticulture Association of the Santa Cruz Mountains, says she is hearing the same thing from everyone she has talked to.

"This harvest has just been really fabulous," Lindsay said. "Everybody is really jazzed and is feeling that this has been an extraordinary year in so many ways."

The reason that this year's harvest is so stellar can be attributed to one thing--Mother Nature.

"We had a very dry winter," Lindsay said. "For the most part, we got all of our rain in November and December. Up at our place, we practically got our full annual rainfall in just those two months. That caused us to have a very long and even growing season and allowed the vines to charge along unimpeded."

For vines that are extremely sensitive to moisture and cold, warmth and a lack of rain can make all the difference. It's important during the spring, when buds are breaking on the vines and the blossoms are setting. And it's just as important in the summer as the fruit, which is susceptible to fungus and mildew when there is rain, develops on the vine.

"The conditions in the spring were very conducive to lots of blossoms, which meant lots of clusters, and ultimately those developed beautifully into the finished grapes," Moulton added. "There was no rain and the fog stayed away during the growing season so the fruit developed perfectly--heavier clusters than normal, big full, fat clusters."

For many vineyards, the weather not only brought outstanding fruit, it also allowed for an early harvest, with some wineries beginning the process two to three weeks earlier than normal and with more crop. Some vineyards, according to Lindsay, started picking as early as mid to late August.

At Saratoga's Savannah Channele, the harvest process began the first week of September. The winery was set to pick 72 tons but ended up with close to 80 as its harvest ended around the second week of October.

"I can't believe we already have this much wine in the barrel. We're really hopeful this year," said assistant winemaker Marc McGinnis.

Burrell School was also ahead and began picking Sept. 1, about three weeks earlier than normal. Moulton anticipated being finished on Oct. 14, in contrast to last year, when he was harvesting into November.

"Last year we were picking as late as Nov. 7 and we were still getting wine into barrels in December," Moulton said. "Right now we're weeks to a month ahead."

Though the early harvest doesn't really make a difference in the winemaking process, it just moves everything the winemakers are already prepared for up a bit. The increase in the amount of crop they are seeing is causing some adjustments to be made at the wineries.

"We're utilizing every barrel we have and buying more," Moulton said. "We're also going to be utilizing every single space that we have" to store the additional wine.

Most Santa Cruz Mountains wineries are able to operate at capacity this year due to the increase in crop. That increase is also allowing winemakers from outside the region who typically can't get their hands on too much Santa Cruz Mountains fruit a rare opportunity to have all they want.

"Usually our fruit is in short supply," Lindsay said. "This year, anyone that wanted Santa Cruz Mountains fruit could get it."

And though this year's crops are bringing smiles to the faces of local winemakers, many say harvest time is reason enough to be happy.

"This time of year is the most fun for me," Moulton said. "I mean it's nonstop and something is going on every single day, but it's fun."

Moulton said that part of the fun is seeing the different set of flavors and profiles that are produced each year.

"You are always looking for a treasure. You are looking for a surprise, for something different," he said. "As a winemaker, I know as soon as the grape is picked what is going to happen. I'm either extremely impressed like this year with new flavors, deeper flavors, more intense flavors, or perhaps somewhat disappointed in a year like 2011 where it wasn't quite as brilliant and bright fruit."

McGinnis, who worked 37 days straight during harvest, agrees that it is a lot of work.

"The logistics of a harvest are you are doing a tremendous amount of work in a short period of time. It's crazy busy, but it's crazy fun," he said. "You only get one chance at it."

"We're in this industry because we like making wine, so it's an exciting time of year," he added. "It's busy around here. You have people that are passionate about the same thing you are. They work long hours for little pay and they love it. We have a lot of fun doing this, and when we get tired we just tell ourselves we aren't and we keep going."

For more information on the vineyards and wineries of the Santa Cruz Mountains, visit scmwa.com.