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UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL: Participants in Friday's vineyard tour get hands-on knowledge at a Bar XX vineyard operated by Ron Pieretti and Wendy Sanda. See story below. Enterprise photo by Craig Koscho

TODAY'S TOP STORY

Annual vineyard tour offers lessons for grape growers

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Tuesday August 1, 2006

News

Annual vineyard tour offers lessons for grape growers

By Craig Koscho
Monday, July 31, 2006 8:41 PM CDT

Calaveras County is going to have to chart its own, unique course in wine offerings if it hopes to generate the kind of interest enjoyed in grape-growing areas such as Napa.

That was just one piece of advice offered during Friday's annual Vineyard Tour coordinated by the county's University of California Cooperative Extension Office and Farm Advisor Ken Churches.

The day-long excursion covered seven vineyards, from the San Andreas area up to Murphys.

Aimed primarily at newer growers and smaller operations, the first two stops drew about 50 people, most of them looking for advice on how to tend their own vineyards.

Participants were given advice by the local vineyard owner and manager and also got some tips from the tour's guest expert, Ed Weber, the county director and viticulture farm advisor from Napa County.

Topics ranged from irrigation and techniques for thinning out vine leaves to the proper pesticides and herbicides to use.

The day began at Bill and Antoinette Griffin's Clondaire Vineyard on Pool Station Road, which, when completed, will cover about nine of the parcel's 30 acres.

Vineyard manager Stephen Collum led the small crowd through the

vineyard, much of it newly planted.

The Griffins are focusing on the Mediterranean for their grapes, planting vines that originated in countries such as Spain and Corsica.

Varieties include Grenache blanc, Marsanne, Rousanne and Mourvedre.

Focusing on these different varieties will give Calaveras County its own identity, Collum said.

Not that the county doesn't produce excellent Cabernets and Merlots, but Collum said those wines are already identified with the Napa area.

"People are not going to come up here for a Cabernet," Collum said.

Clondaire Vineyard has already contracted with three wineries - Hatcher, Twisted Oak and Zucca Mountain - that are already emphasizing Mediterranean wines, Collum said.

The second vineyard, on Appaloosa Road in Bar XX, is owned by Ron Pieretti and Wendy Sanda.

An even smaller operation, it will have about three acres of vineyards when completed.

Pieretti and Sanda will produce their own wine, and have submitted plans to the county for a home with a small winery below it.

Varieties include Grenache, Syrah, and Viognier.

Of interest for one tour member at the vineyard was the pair of owl houses that towered over the vines.

One of them was empty, but Pieretti said the other was the home of a family of owls.

"They're doing some pretty good damage on the gophers," Pieretti said.

Teresa Spence took extensive notes during the tour.

She and her husband Rodney planted their first vines between San Andreas and Mountain Ranch just a couple weeks ago, although they've been taking part in the tours for four years.

"It takes a lot of planning," Teresa Spence said.

"We wanted to build a home first," Rodney added.

Now they've taken the plunge, planting 106 vines, and hope to keep learning, possibly by taking some classes at the University of

California, Davis.

"Vines are not easy," Teresa said. "You can't just stick them in the ground and expect a good crop."

The recent heat wave won't have a lasting impact on the county's grape crop if the rest of the season stays on a normal track, according to those on the tour.

Even though the county suffered along with the rest of the state through some scorching temperatures recently, it came a little too early in the season to cause any lasting harm, Weber said.

Proper leafing techniques and adequate irrigation prevented short-term effects, such as sunburned fruit, Pieretti said.

Vineyard leaves are thinned on the side that gets the morning sun, and left thicker on the hotter, afternoon side.

Pieretti said planting uphill to the west means the upper row of vines also provides shade for the afternoon side of the row just below it.

The day-long tour ended with a dinner and reception at Broll Mountain Vineyards in Murphys.

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