

BRENTWOOD NEWS

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WINERY DEVELOPMENT GROWS SLOWLY



NEIL COHN is one of several grape growers considering opening a wine tasting room in Eastern Contra Costa County.

Red tape binds permit process

Some say an orchestrated effort is needed so the East County area can draw tourists

By Tamya Rose

BRENTWOOD — Though Contra Costa County has boosted regulations that are supposed to make it easier for local grape growers to open up wineries and tasting rooms in the county's 11,000-acre agricultural core, the benefit requirements are more complex than what growers had hoped.

Without that, it's risky, says Dr. Kent Rosenblum of the award-winning Alameda-based Rosenblum Cellars who once considered opening a winery in the area. "You're building a winery way out there when there's not an already-established wine country."

Still, locals were eager — until they became mired in procedures, just after new regulations passed in April 2004. Ron Eason of Eson Family Winery was anxious to open a multiple growers willing to start the enterprise with a bang and bring in the crowd.

Also early on, Jeff Tamayo of Tamayo Family Vineyards submitted an application for a winery and hoped for an opening by this fall. He ended up withdrawing earlier versions of the idea of opening elsewhere.

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plans because the county asked for more detail. Others are experiencing the same thing — it's just taking awhile.

Once the movement happens, however, city leaders believe it will change the face of eastern Contra Costa County. Home to acres upon acres of wine grapes, plus a booming suburban population, the area is just begging for wineries — a la Livermore wine country — and has been for some time.

Neil Cohn, local grape grower and co-owner of Hannah Nicole Vineyards, says he's heard the grumbling and the trepidation over county permitting. But he believes if applications are delivered to the county in the right way, with ultra-detailed information, they'll be accepted with no problem.

Regulators require information about wine processing and storage, the size, location and hours of tasting rooms, and any arrangements for special events and parking.

"I tend to be an optimist, but I think this is absolutely doable," said Cohn, who, with relatives, is getting ready to release Hannah Nicole's 2004 white wines. On Saturday, there will be music and food at the Brentwood Wine Store to celebrate.

Hannah Nicole grows some 46 acres of grapes locally — just off Ballou Road — and then ships them to Madara for bottling. So far, that has worked well. And when Cohn opens a local facility, it will be a tasting room only and not a full-blown winery.

"I have a good relationship with a winery; they have a state-of-the-art facility," he said. "So for me, it doesn't make sense to change the situation. They buy our grapes for a bit of uses, and though we have a retail license, we operate under their winemaking license."



NEIL COHN is getting ready to release Hannah Nicole's 2004 white wines. On Saturday, there will be music and food at the Brentwood Wine Store to celebrate.

"A lot of people do it this way; as long as you use 85-percent Contra Costa grapes, it's considered a local wine."

Any way you slice it, local growers say, the area is prime for grape-growing, and county officials should be bending over backward to accommodate ag-tourism.

Rosenblum, for example, says eastern Contra Costa is the best place statewide to grow certain crops. "We're probably one of the biggest users of grapes from that area," he said.

This plans to open a major winery at the much-touted Vineyards at Marsh Creek, which is being proposed outside of the agricultural core, have fallen through, however.

City Manager Donna Landeros said the event center was never a formal part of the plans, and that if agreed upon, it would have been a steep city subsidy. "We're still planning on moving ahead with the amphitheater, and I think this will be an excellent project," she said.

She and Mayor Brian Swisher said that farmer-developer Ron Nunn, along with developer Blackhawk Services, are currently looking for another winery.

"This project wasn't built around Rosenblum coming in," Landeros said. "I'm sure there will be a winery there. I know there are talks going on."

"It's going to be a great project and it's just a case of determining which winery."

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