



JOHN VEITCH, the vineyard manager for Hannah Nicole Vineyards in Brentwood, checks merlot grapes for any signs of mildew Monday. The grapes get shipped to Madera. DAN ROSS/STAFF/TIMES

CONTRA COSTA'S TOP CROPS

Grapes tie for fourth place among Contra Costa's agricultural commodities. Below are Contra Costa's top farm products in 2002 and their gross production value.

**NURSERY STOCK
BEDDING PLANTS**
\$26.1 million

CATTLE AND CALVES
\$15.2 million

SWEET CORN
\$9.6 million

**LIVESTOCK PRODUCTS
(mostly milk)**
\$6.6 million

GRAPES
\$6.6 million

Source: Contra Costa County
Department of Agriculture

County's cork on wine operations could pop

Supervisors consider overturning a zoning rule prohibiting winemaking

By Peter Felsenfeld
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The farmer needs three primary conditions to grow grapes with perfect acidity — warm days, cool nights and a dry climate. All are available in eastern Contra Costa.

The viticultural entrepreneur needs something more bureaucratic to open a winery — government permission. That, to the chagrin of many local growers, has proven impossible.

Vineyard owners may not build facilities to crush grapes, ferment and bottle the juices and sell the final product in the 11,000-acre agricultural core area southeast of Brentwood.

Contra Costa supervisors may remove the zoning roadblock. The board today will consider changing the general plan to al-

low wineries and olive oil mills in the protected area.

Bringing a little Napa Valley to east Contra Costa could give growers the economic boost they need to stay in business, said Supervisor Millie Greenberg of Danville. The county-designated agricultural core is in her district.

Only vibrant agriculture, she said, will discourage developers from prospecting the land.

"It's extremely important to make it possible for them (growers) to remain economically viable," she said. "We need a working greenbelt."

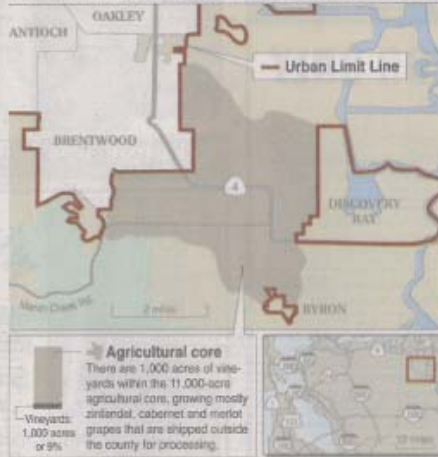
The county planning commission approved the amendment in March. It insisted on design standards to ensure the wineries have minimal impact on the environment.

"I don't think the plan would lead to excessive amounts of urban use," said Supervisor Federal Glover of Pittsburg. "It's a

See WINE, Page 23

Vineyards in the ag core

County supervisors will consider changing Contra Costa's general plan to allow for wineries and olive oil mills in the agricultural core. Supporters of the idea say it will give farmers another way to make money and an incentive to keep land in agriculture.



JON MARTIN/TIMES

Wine

FROM PAGE 1

real carrot to keep farmers here."

Around 2,000 acres countywide are dedicated to vineyards, mostly cabernet, zinfandel and merlot. Nearly half of the land falls within the agricultural core, said Community Development director Dennis Barry.

Growers ship most of their crop to winemakers in the Livermore and Napa valleys, markets that are drying up. Grape prices have slipped over the past year, placing added strains on Contra Costa growers, said John Viano, president of the county's farm bureau and owner of Viano Vineyards near Martinez, Contra Costa's only winery.

If the county wants to designate an area for agriculture, he said, it should support its farmers any way possible: "It kind of defeats the purpose if growers can't sell their products."

Grape growers hope the change prompts a Contra Costa wine renaissance. In the early 20th century, the county boasted between 15 and 20 wineries, said Ed Meyer, county agricultural commissioner.

They couldn't survive the effects of Prohibition, the Depression and an infestation of grape phylloxera, a pest that ravages vineyards, Meyer said. "Maybe it's time for wineries here to make a comeback."

Neil Cohn said he wants to be part of the action. The Brentwood resident is an insurance salesman in Pleasanton, but his passion lies with the merlot and cabernet sauvignon grapes he grows on 32 acres.

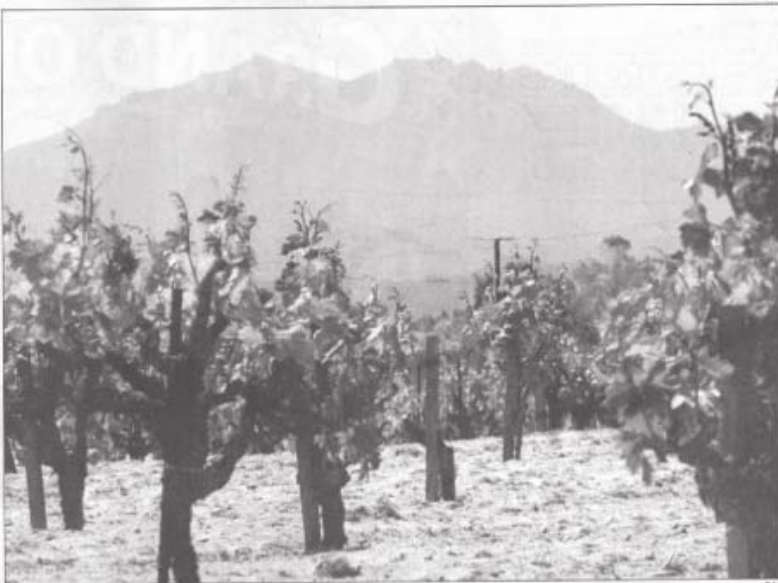
"What makes the wine good is terrific grapes," he said. "And that's what we have here."

Two years ago he formed the wine company Hannah Nicole Vineyards. Cohn ships his Contra Costa grapes to Madera, where a professional winemaker manages the operation.

If supervisors change the general plan, Cohn said, he plans to open a tasting room in Brentwood to make some money. The next step would be a full winery.

"People already come to Brentwood to buy apples and corn," he said. "It would be nice for them to stop by a tasting room and pick up a little wine."

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GRAPEVINES soak up the sun in Oakley, with Mount Diablo in the background. About 2,000 acres countywide are dedica- DAN