

Chef's Heritage

Pilar Sanchez draws on her family's history / C1

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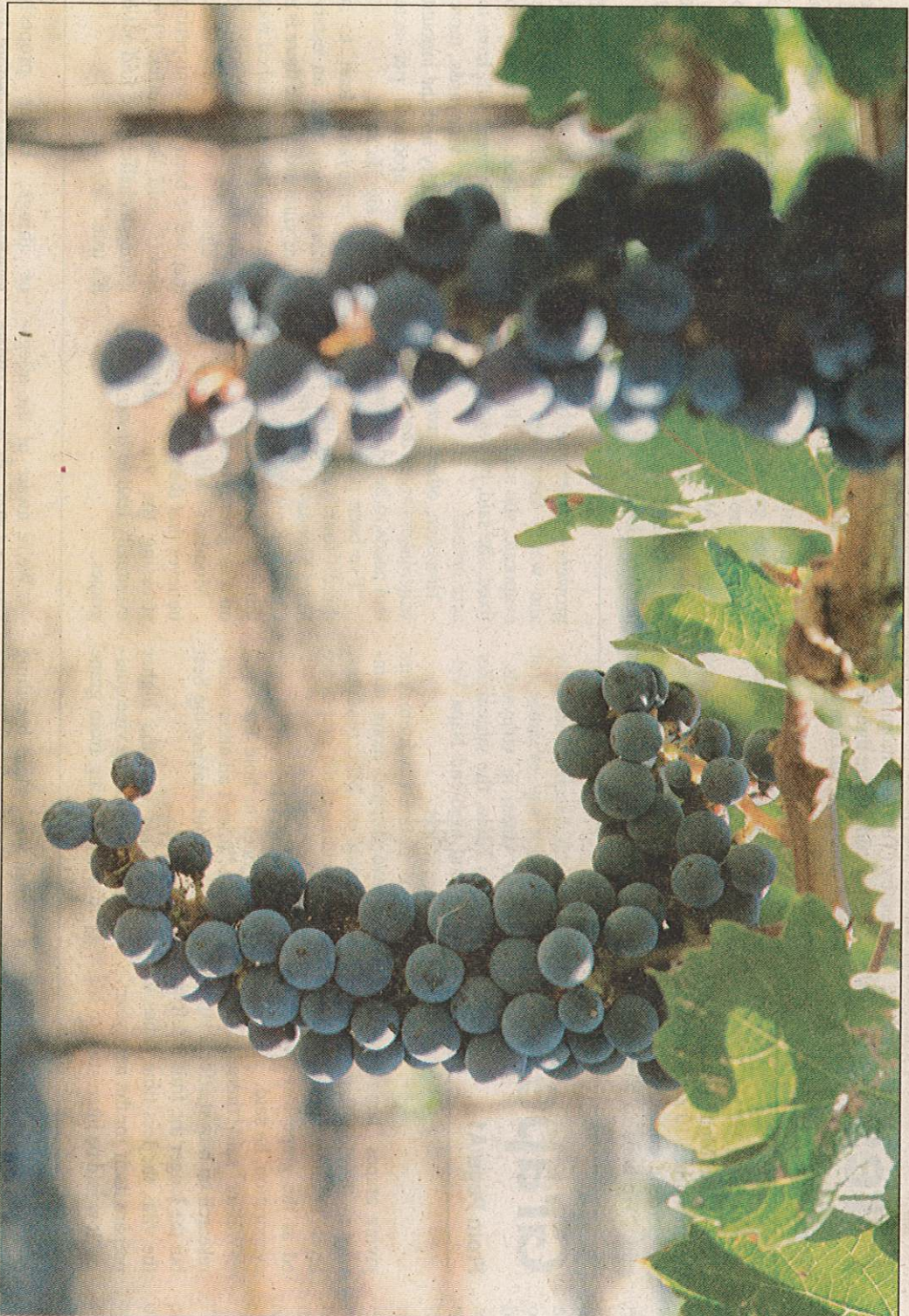
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Hanging on the grape vine



Winegrapes wait to be picked at a vineyard on Oakville Grade. Late in the growing season, tension arises between grape growers and winemakers as to when to harvest the grapes. TSUTOMU FUJITA / REGISTER

Growers, winemakers at odds when to pick fruit

By GABE FRIEDMAN
Register Staff Writer

As Andy Beckstoffer's staff began testing sugar levels in grapes this summer to see if they were ripe, the winemakers purchasing his fruit used a different test: Their palate.

This difference in approach has led to a growing strain in the relationship between growers and the wineries purchasing fruit. Using taste buds to determine when grapes are ready to come off the vine marks a departure from the past, when the brix level — the percentage of sugar in the grape — and other numerical data were more prominent factors in the decision.

As winemakers have pushed for longer "hang time" on the vines, allowing brix levels to shoot higher, they say they have been able to produce better wines. But others in the wine industry say that the practice threatens the economic viability of grape growers, by reducing crop levels and adversely affecting

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Andy Beckstoffer
Grape grower

the health of grape vines. "It's a change from grapes being harvested on a physiological level when the vines were ready," said Beckstoffer. "to a psychological level, when (the grapes) taste good."

Beckstoffer said that the higher brix levels do produce the bigger, bolder wines that winemakers want, but he argues that the practice is threatening the long term economic

sustainability of grape growers. In the past week, Beckstoffer and Lee Hudson, both large independent growers, asked the Napa Valley Grape Growers Association and the California Association of Winegrape Growers to push for research into the effect that longer hang time has on the health of the vine.

This past harvest, Beckstoffer said he watched as his grapes shriveled and shed 25 percent of their weight, while the brix levels increased from 24 degrees to 28 degrees. More importantly, he said, his crop levels have consistently dropped off since winemakers began pushing for harvests at higher brix levels.

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Andy Walker, a professor of viticulture at the University of California, Davis, said that

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the research, because I certainly haven't seen any evidence (of stress on vines) in vineyards," said Mia Klein, the winemaker for several high-end Napa Valley wine labels.

Klein defends winemakers who have stopped using numbers, such as brix readings, when deciding if the grapes are ready to harvest. "The winemakers are always the last ones to hold the bag," she said. "It isn't all about numbers; it's about making the best wine possible."

Complaints that the higher brix levels are hurting vine quality may be coming from grape

growers who are paid by the ton and watch their crop literally evaporate, she said. This can be fixed, she said, by paying by the acre instead.

However, other growers and winemakers argue that the problem needs to be addressed now. "I've been preaching this for three, four years now," said Marc Mondavi, co-proprietor of Charles Krug Winery. "I don't think the vines can cope with it on a long-term basis."

Mondavi added that he believes that the practice is over stressing the vines and will eventually lead to lower quality grapes.

Grapes

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giving grapes "hang time" is a way to develop flavors. Sugar levels become more concentrated as the grape loses water to evaporation, he said.

Walker said there is little research on how it affects vines, but the longer the fruit is left on the vine, the less time it has to prepare itself for the next year. "It would be interesting to see

There will be environmental consequences if the problem is not addressed, according to Mondavi. Growers will have to replant their vineyards more often if quality and the amount of grapes produced per acre declines significantly.

New vineyards lead to a greater erosion than an established vineyard, where there is a cover crop and established root system that anchors the soil.

"This is a whole new issue that we've been just whispering about," said Beckstoffer. "I'm issuing a challenge to find out if it's true."