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County's oldest crop getting new growth

By: BRADLEY J. FIKES - Staff Writer

DEL MAR ---- The glass is getting fuller for those who make and partake of San Diego County's oldest agricultural product.

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With more local wineries opening each year, visitors at the San Diego County Fair are getting more to choose from in the fair's annual winetasting. Twelve wineries are taking part in the free winetasting, sponsored by the San Diego County Vintners Association.

Friday's winetasting was conducted by Schwaesdall Winery in Ramona, one of the county's hottest spots for new wineries and vineyards. Five of the wineries leading the tastings during the fair are located in Ramona. And in January, the region became an officially designated American Viticultural Area, a designation that helps wineries promote their region.

About 25 guests showed up for the 4 p.m. winetasting near the San Diego Pavilion. It was led by John Schwaesdall, winery owner, and emceed by Sam Bass, KYYX radio announcer. They went through four wines ---- two whites and two reds. Guests got to keep the glass, emblazoned with the logo of the vintners association.

"Every day, we've got a winery here, pouring wine," Schwaesdall said.

The winetastings are good for publicizing the wineries, said Erik Humphrey, winemaker for San Pasqual Winery, which was started in Escondido but recently moved to the Pacific Beach area of San Diego for a more urban setting.

"We're promoting ourselves, and our collective industry, spreading the word that there's good wine coming out of San Diego County," said Humphrey, an Encinitas resident who started winemaking as a hobby in his garage.

Viticulture came to San Diego County in 1769 with Father Junipero Serra, founder of Mission San Diego de Alcalá. San Diego was the biggest winemaking region in the state before Prohibition, Schwaesdall said, but the region never recovered. All the local wineries shut down except for Bernardo Winery, which squeaked through making sacramental wine for the Catholic diocese. Bass, who lives three blocks from the winery, is a big fan.



Robin Huntingdon, visiting from Denver, Colo., has a taste of wine poured for her at the San Diego County Fair during a daily wine tasting session.

BILL WECHTER Staff Photographer

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Now, a growing group of wine enthusiasts, people new to agriculture and those who are converting from other crops, are bringing the industry back.

Hawkwatch Winery in Warner Springs is the newest addition to the local winemaking scene, said Alex McGeary, president of the San Diego County Vintners Association. The association has a new Web site, at www.sandiegowineries.org. McGeary and his wife, Pamela, own Shadow Mountain Vineyards and Winery in Warner Springs.

Viticulture is still a small part of San Diego County agriculture ---- the fair's promotional mandate. But it is growing, while many other crops are declining as urbanization spreads throughout the county.

In 2002, 173 acres of grapes and winegrapes were harvested in the county, worth \$62,000, according to the county. By 2003, the acreage had increased to 304 acres, with production worth \$240,000. And in 2004, acreage shrank slightly to 300 acres, but the value rose to \$378,000.

Wineries are tourist draws, McGeary said, part of the trend toward "agritourism," using the county's picturesque farms as tourism draws.

"Agritourism is nice clean tourist dollars, and the county likes nice clean tourist dollars," McGeary said.

Viticulture also represents an opportunity for farmers of other crops, because grapevines don't need much water. By contrast, high water costs for avocado and citrus production have hardpressed those farmers.

"I think as citrus declines and avocado production declines, farmers see this as a way to maintain an agricultural lifestyle and economy in the future of San Diego," McGeary said.

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