

They said it couldn't be done —

Growing Premium Wine Grapes in Southern California

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By ALTON PRYOR

The man who said it couldn't be done didn't know John Moramarco. For the past five years Moramarco has been instrumental in developing vineyards of premium quality wine grapes at Rancho California in Riverside County.

John is readily aware that critics of Southern California as a grape growing territory seldom think of anything other than the old vineyards in the Ontario-Fontana area, which are lacking quality compared to the Napa vineyards.

But it isn't fair to use that small area as a yardstick for the whole of Southern California, Moramarco claims.

Moramarco supervises the La Serena Vineyard Association's grape growing operation. He uses all of the modern techniques he can to improve the crop.

FOR INSTANCE, he depends heavily on tensiometers, or moisture indicators, and now has several experiments going with the devices.

"We must have 30 to 40 stations of Irrometers," he told *California Farmer*. Irrometer is a manufacturer of tensiometers. "At first you think they are pretty expensive. But if you save just one irrigation with their use, or if you keep your vines from being over-stressed, then they have paid for themselves."

He is also training the vines for mechanical harvesting. He said a specially designed four-wheel drive self-leveling machine would be used because of the rolling terrain.

Moramarco considers proper irrigation critical and is testing different methods. For instance, he has Irrometers connected in with the overhead permanent sprinkler system, but he is also testing the use of tensiometers with drip irrigation and with automatic clocks.

HE IS impressed with the drip test results. "In the first year alone," he said, "we used one-fifth the water that we did

with overhead sprinklers but got 10 times the vine growth."

A worker takes a reading from the tensiometers every Monday, so that each month, there are at least four readings to work with. "Once you learn to use them and you know how to chart what they tell you, you really rely on them," Moramarco claimed.

He has installed them at various depths, starting at 2 feet, then 4 feet, 6 feet and 8 feet. He said it was necessary to have them at various elevations and soil textures to get accurate information.

As far as comparing Rancho California area grapes to those in the Napa area, Moramarco said such a comparison is not yet fair because you are talking about vines that are only four to five years old at Rancho California while those at Napa are much older.

The sugar-acid in fruit from the older vines is more in balance than it is from younger vines, he explained. But when Rancho California vines are eight or nine years old, he thinks you will get a better comparison.

"I THINK some of the wines we make here at Rancho California will be known worldwide," he said.

Others, apparently, think the same. One individual planted 250 acres of grapes this year and plans another 250 next year.

There is a wine grower's association with 11 grower members there now. Within the next four years, Moramarco predicts there will be two or three wineries.

Last year, all of the grapes were sent to Brookside Winery for processing. This year, however, Moramarco claimed three wineries have shown interest in the Rancho California grape harvest, including a couple from Napa.

There have also been some plantings of premium wine grapes in the San Luis Rey Downs area, further south from



JOHN MORAMARCO takes a moisture reading on one of the many Irrometer stations at La Serena Vineyards Association. These devices take the guesswork out of timing irrigations.

Rancho California, as well as in the San Juan Capistrano area of Orange County.

MORAMARCO feels that of the dozen or so varieties that have been tested in the area, there will eventually be three or four reds and three or four whites that will emerge as the most prominent.

Those that now look promising include Johannesburg Riesling, Petite Sirrah, Pinot Chardonnay, Emerald Riesling and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Moramarco is aware that unless the area can produce a premium wine, it cannot compete in the wine business. They cannot compete in the less expensive wine market, he said.

"We have to be the premium wine country of Southern California or we cannot make it," he said, adding, "We not only have to be but we are going to be. I have no reservations about that."

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