

# Harvesting Something

## Ag minor would fill niche in California's wine industry

by Bob Anderson

Cal Poly is hoping to pop the cork soon on a new release from the College of Agriculture:

Three departments are proposing to offer a minor in wine and viticulture.

The university has been teaching basic courses in wine-grape growing for quite a while as part of its crop science program. And in the last few years the university has added related courses, planted a vineyard, formed a student club, and taken other steps toward a program that's begun making significant contributions to the industry and the state.

But if you look in the index of the Cal Poly catalog, you won't find the word "wine." And students are looking for it.

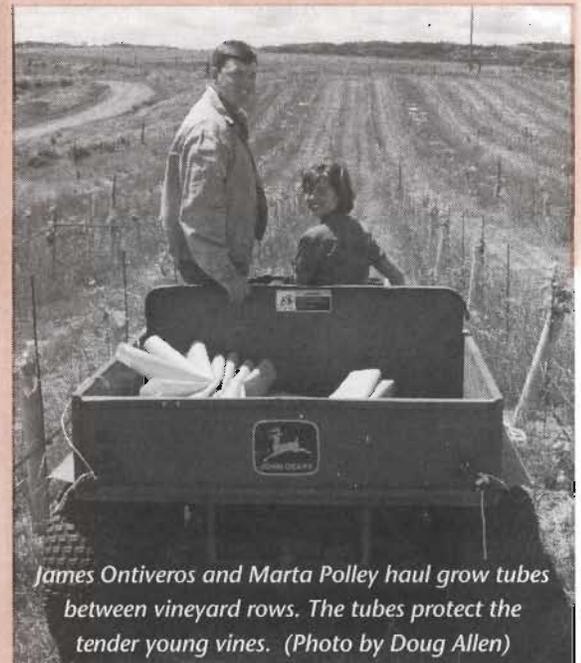
Students in majors all over campus are interested — in ag, speech, biology, business. They're paying extra to take wine marketing through Cal Poly's Extended Education because it hasn't been available as a regular

course. Creating a minor will help guide students toward the career they're already seeking.

Central Coast wineries and Cal Poly alumni in the industry also like the idea.

What kind of program will it be?

"We're looking at what we want to become," says Crop Science Professor and Department Head Paul Fountain, longtime viticulture instructor and one of the faculty members writing the proposal



James Ontiveros and Marta Polley haul grow tubes between vineyard rows. The tubes protect the tender young vines. (Photo by Doug Allen)

for the minor. "We're going slowly so we don't become something industry won't support."

Wine marketing was an empty niche before Cal Poly moved into it. The university began offering its successful wine marketing certificate program as an extension course in 1992 after a student's senior project pointed to the need.

"There isn't a wine marketing program anywhere else," says Janice Mondavi, a 1977 agribusiness graduate and member of the Napa Valley's Peter Mondavi family, owners of the Charles Krug Winery.

# New Under the Sun

## College of Ag Pours Wine for Industry Alums

"Cal Poly's the only one on the ball [in developing a wine marketing program]," says Gretchen Crebs, a 1996 ag business grad now working for Sebastiani Vineyards in Sonoma.

Now overflowing with both regular students and people from the industry, the program has taught wine market analysis, wine distribution and pricing, sensory evaluation of wine, governmental wine regulations, and wine promotion and packaging. It's directed by two agribusiness professors with long interest and experience in the industry, Phil Doub and Bill Amspacher. Food science and nutrition professor Bob Noyes co-teaches the sensory evaluation class.

The extension classes will be blended with the university's regular courses to help produce the wine minor. They'll still be available to industry people through Extended Ed.

The growing of the grapes will be Cal Poly's other specialty.

"We're clearly going to have more courses in viticulture," says Associate Dean of Agriculture Mark Shelton. "We have a lot of student demand."

And it's going to be viticulture with a regional bouquet.

Ken Volk, a 1981 fruit science graduate and president and winemaker at Wild Horse Winery near Templeton, is one who believes Cal Poly can play an important part in solving some of the problems specific to Central Coast growers. For one thing, he sees the threat from certain insect and bacterial pests looming larger as coastal vineyards spread over the region faster than subdivisions. The mile-after-mile of vines makes it easier for biological problems to jump from one grower to another.

"It's a very serious situation," Volk says. "Certainly Cal Poly's a resource that can be used by the industry."

"That community orientation . . . Wineries are glad to see someone focusing on Central Coast wineries," says Becky Tooker, public relations manager for Byron Winery in Santa Maria and a 1994 agribusiness grad.



Enjoying a harvest toast are (left to right) Salina Jen, Janice Mondavi, Marc Mondavi, and Joe Jen. (Photo by Lisa Hersch)

For a university that hasn't had a real wine program, Cal Poly has a surprising number of alumni making wine.

And those alumni, too, want to see the university's wine program grow.

A good number of those grads are in the Napa Valley, and to learn what they and other alums are thinking, the College of Agriculture held an inaugural Vintage Green and Gold Dinner in St. Helena in May. Hosted by 1977 agribusiness grad Janice Mondavi of Napa Valley's Peter Mondavi family, served by the enthusiastic student members of Cal Poly's Vines to Wines Club, and held at the Charles Krug Winery Estate, the gala banquet attracted a crowd of 140.

Proceeds benefited the Vines to Wines Club and the St.

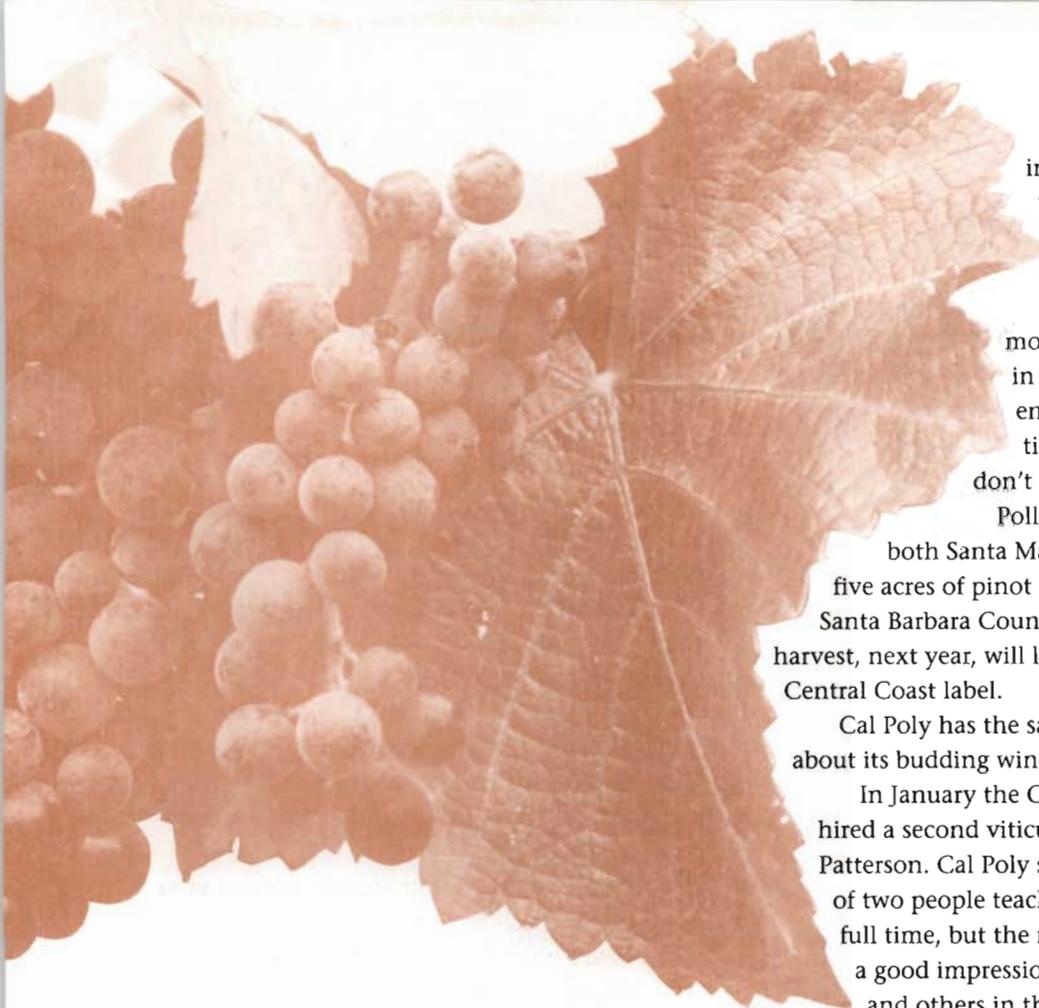
Helena High School agriculture program. Mondavi sees involvement with Napa area high schools as a potentially very productive program.

Gretchen Crebs, agribusiness 1996, now with Sebastiani Vineyards in Sonoma, was another alum glad to see her alma mater becoming more visible in the state's best-known winemaking region.

"It was exciting for alumni to hear President Baker and Dean Jen be excited about expanding the program," Crebs says.

"I'd call the dinner a milestone in our relationship with the industry," says Crop Science Professor Paul Fountain. "We've had individual contact. Now we have a formal relationship." ☐

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industry," she says, and a way to make the university even better known for its special strengths.

"Cal Poly students are more hands-on," Polley says, in an unsolicited endorsement of Cal Poly's time-tested approach. "We don't just know what's in books."

Polley and James Ontiveros — both Santa Maria natives — have planted five acres of pinot noir grapes in northern Santa Barbara County. They hope their first harvest, next year, will launch another successful Central Coast label.

Cal Poly has the same kind of optimism about its budding wine program.

In January the Crop Science Department hired a second viticulture professor, Keith Patterson. Cal Poly still has only the equivalent of two people teaching wine-related classes full time, but the new prof has already made a good impression on Volk at Wild Horse and others in the industry.

An essential ingredient of that community-oriented program will be Cal Poly's learn-by-doing tradition. Cal Poly students and grads wouldn't have it any other way.

"Until you get your hands dirty, you don't really know what's going on," says fruit science senior Brendan Eliason. "What Cal Poly can do is train people to do the actual work."

And Eliason has obviously learned. After he interned last summer in the respected but tiny David Coffaro Winery in Sonoma County — he and owner Coffaro were the only ones working in the winery — Coffaro named him assistant winemaker. Now he spends half a year in school and half a year making wine (during the busy harvest and "crush" seasons).

Eliason's case is an example of the attraction the industry can exert. Originally an industrial technology major, he took an internship with Gallo Sonoma in 1996 to scratch an itchy curiosity. After some exhausting but surprisingly satisfying 70-hour weeks, "I knew the wine business was going to be more than a hobby," he says. And he switched majors.

Agribusiness major Marta Polley, president of the student Vines to Wines Club, says she feels fortunate to have Cal Poly's reputation preceding her and is glad to see the wine program growing.

"It's a chance for Cal Poly to get known in the

Meanwhile, the proposal for the minor is just beginning the long paper trail through a number of campus committees and on to California State University headquarters in Long Beach for final approval. But it has the support of Dean of Agriculture Joe Jen and Cal Poly President Warren J. Baker. And while it can't be official and in the catalog before the 1999-2000 edition, Fountain hopes the courses

themselves will be ready before the technicalities are complete.

Like wine itself, university wine programs take a while to mature. But the juice is in the barrel. Cal Poly could be unbottling a standout wine program in time to help celebrate the millennium. ☐



*Fruit science senior Brendan Eliason mixes zinfandel grapes during fermentation. (Photo by Pat Coffaro)*