



Fine Vines

BY SUSAN McDONALD

Keith Patterson contemplated the upcoming grape harvest as he stood among the leafy vines growing in the 10-acre vineyard at the north end of campus.

Fat bunches of pinot noir grapes were ripening quickly in the late August heat, and Patterson, a professor in the Horticulture and Crop Science Department, was fairly certain the dark purple fruit was nearly ready for picking. He popped open a few grapes with his fingers to look at the seeds inside. "When the grapes are ripe, their seeds are dark brown," Patterson says.

The seeds in his hand ranged in color from pale beige to deep brown. "You can see the grapes don't all ripen at the same time," he says. "Knowing when to harvest is one of our challenges."

The ability to meet such challenges, whether they're found in the field or in a classroom or laboratory, is one of the many reasons Cal Poly students are in such great demand in the wine industry, Patterson explains. For every student who

most of their major courses in three departments: Horticulture and Crop Science, Food Science and Nutrition, and Agribusiness.

By the time they graduate, students know how to grow the grapes, produce the wine and run a wine-related business.

The program is also taking on an international flavor. In the works is creation of an exchange program for students and teachers with the University of Adelaide in Australia, as well as another exchange opportunity in South America.

About 35 students have transferred into the wine and viticulture major since its inception in spring 2004, with nearly one-third coming from families who grow grapes and produce wine commercially, says Mary Pedersen, associate dean of the College of Agriculture.

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graduates, Patterson says he hears from at least three wine-industry employers hoping to hire them.

"The big players come to Cal Poly first," Patterson says. "Winemakers know our students will know the grapes."

What began as a wine/viticulture minor about seven years ago is now the university's first interdepartmental major in the College of Agriculture. Students take

The university has no intention of bottling its own label for sale, says Pedersen. "We're interested in teaching how to produce wine; we're not interested in going into wine production. And we don't want to compete with local wineries."

Partnerships with the wine industry helped develop six acres of new vineyard, saving the university approximately \$180,000. Sunridge Nursery and



Horticulture and Crop Science Department Professor Keith Patterson and Associate Dean of the College of Agriculture Mary Pedersen (Photo by Susan McDonald)

Vintage Nursery donated the vines, and Harrow Ag Services designed the vineyard layout. Netafim, an Australian company, donated the irrigation supplies, and Quidan donated the trellis supplies. Cal West designed the irrigation system, and Mesa Vineyard Management planted the vines and installed the trellis and irrigation systems.

Students keep the vineyard flourishing, some working through the summer. Tyler Houston, 24, came to Cal Poly because of the emphasis on viticulture and hopes to find a career working in a vineyard. "It's a great program," he says. During the summer, he came out every day to water the vines. That was in addition to the 14-hour days he put in working for an outside delivery company.

"Our students, like Tyler, are very bright, very motivated," Patterson says. "When Tyler leaves here, he'll know how to work a full day. This attitude is representative of the culture at Cal Poly." ■