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Winning wines ready for public tastings

More than 3,000 wines were entered in the annual Orange County Fair competition.

By **ANNE VALDESPINO**

Special to the Register

Corn dogs, carnies, classy wines. Summer is here, and the Orange County Fair Commercial Wine Competition is back. Winners have been announced, and Orange County Wine Society volunteers are busy preparing to serve these and others at a courtyard on the fairgrounds tucked in among the food-on-a-stick, livestock and craft booths.

The unlikely combination of fine wines and folksy fare has been a tradition since 1977. Wine Society President Larry Graham noted some of this year's trends before a sampling of the crème de la crème of its winners for members of the media.

"Syrah has been our fastest growing entry in the past few years," he told the panel assembled at the fairgrounds. "This year the Central Coast has dominated the awards.



Something to howl about: Wolf Vineyards' 2004 Petite Syrah was one of 17 wines to earn a Four Star Gold medal. "Syrah has been our fastest growing entry in the past few years," Orange County Wine Society President Larry Graham said.

PAUL E. RODRIGUEZ, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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Other areas that bounced up were Mendocino and Lodi. Napa and Sonoma barely showed."

Graham explained that many well-established Napa and Sonoma wineries choose not to enter because they don't need the publicity. The contest is a chance for the little guys to make their names. "We're becoming a home for the small winery," Graham said. "It's an award to be treasured, and it can bring instant sales."

Graham outlined the basics of the contest and its rules. No entry fees are charged. Wines are judged in their own categories against similarly priced varietals. Judges are mostly vintners. In fact, the premium Zinfandel adjudicator's list reads like a who's who of top winemakers in that category: Joel Peterson of Ravenswood, Kent Rosenblum of Rosenblum Cellars, Ondine Chattan of Geyser Peak and Nancy Walker of Mariah Vineyards.

This year a total of 3,189 wines were entered, and 1,625 medals were presented in Gold, Silver, Bronze, Best of Show and Best of Show Syrah categories. A limited number of Four Star Gold medals were awarded – this occurs when all four judges on a panel recommend a gold medal without conferring. Only 17 wines received the award this year.

When the swirling and sipping started, print and online journalists compared their impressions with those of the judges. "I drink vintage ports and I expected to be very critical, but I was shocked," Jay Selman, producer of Grape Radio, said about the 2003 Vintage "Royal Escort" from Napa Valley. "I thought the alcohol was under control, it was well-balanced and

A selection of Orange County Fair Commercial Wine Competition winners were sampled by members of the media. Following are a list of wines tasted, with composite comments by Eric Anderson and Jay Selman of GrapeRadio.com and freelance food and wine writers Elizabeth Evans, Christopher Trela and Anne Valdespino:

- **Mumm Napa, Non Vintage Sparkling Wine, Brut, Reserve.** Gold Award (\$25): Lemony, dry, not too effervescent
- **Brander, 2005 Sauvignon Blanc, Santa Ynez Valley.** Gold Award (\$14): Scent of cloves and boxwood, not grassy
- **Kenneth Volk Vineyards, 2004 Chardonnay, Santa Barbara County, Santa Maria Valley, Sierra Madre Vineyards.** Four Star Gold Award (\$24): Pale gold in color, rich mouthfeel, a bit smoky but not over-oaked
- **Costa de Oro, 2004 Pinot Noir, Santa Maria Valley, Gold Coast Vineyard, Estate.** Four Star Gold and Best of Show-Red awards (\$24): Big, soft, velvety, could stand some aging
- **Rosenblum Cellars, 2004 Syrah, Sonoma County, Hillside Vineyards.** Gold and Best of Show-Syrah awards (\$25): Dark, full-bodied, jammy with blackberry and hints of cedar
- **Carol Shelton, 2004 Zinfandel, "Rocky Reserve" Rockpile, Dry Creek Valley, Florence Vineyard.** Gold Award (\$33): Rustic, brambly, not overly sweet, well-balanced
- **Wolff Vineyards, 2004 Petite Syrah, San Luis Obispo County, Edna Valley, Wolff Vineyards.** Four Star Gold and Best of Show-Red awards

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complex. I liked it and would have no problem having it in my cellar.”

“I’m a newbie so I probably couldn’t tell an award-winning wine from a Two-Buck Chuck, but those were some of the best wines I’ve had in my short wine career,” said Matt Degen, a copy editor and staff writer for Squeezeoc.com. “My favorite was the Costa de Oro Pinot Noir.”

(\$20): Inky, big nose, hearty, serve with cassoulet or wild-boar stew

• **Prager Winery & Port Works, 2003 Vintage Port, “Royal Escort,” Napa Valley, Paladini Vineyard.** Gold and Best of Show-Dessert awards (\$80): Well-balanced, complex, smooth, worthy of passing around after dinner at a British table

Restaurant reviewer Elizabeth Evans noted that most of the wines were big and bold, but definitely food friendly. “I wonder if wine styles are changing because cocktails have been popular?” she asked. “More diners may be ordering a bottle with the meal, not a glass before the meal. When I drank the Chardonnay, I thought, ‘Bring on the chilled seafood.’ I’d love to have it with a plate of cold lobster and clams.”

Wine lovers will get the chance to dream up their own food pairings at the fair. The Wine Courtyard will be open July 7-30 from noon to 11 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays and from 10 a.m. to 11 p.m. Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. Award wines are available at \$1 per 1-ounce pour. Other varietals are available at \$5 per 6-ounce glass. House wines, wine coolers and Champagne splits are \$4. A manager’s special each day will include pours of three award-winning wines and a souvenir glass for \$6.

Proceeds from sales will fund next year’s competition. The OCWS is a nonprofit organization that awards oenology, viticulture and culinary scholarships.

Competition winners will be posted on the OCWS Web site, www.ocws.org, and compiled into an awards booklet available at the fair. The society will hold wine seminars on various subjects throughout the run of the fair. Admission is \$20 and includes tastes of wine, an awards book and a souvenir glass

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