

# The Press Democrat

## Sonoma County Harvest Fair announces wine medals

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(l to r) Kristi Mohar, Ellen Landis and Jessica Altieri comprised the first all woman judging panel at the Sonoma County Harvest Fair wine competition. (JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat)

**Forty wines won Best of Class in the 2015 Sonoma County Harvest Fair Wine Competition, according to results released today.**

There were 315 wines that won gold medals and, of those, 89 received Double Gold distinction, which means they received unanimous “gold” votes from their panel of judges.

The Best of Class winners in the red, white, sparkling and specialty categories range from family-owned wineries, like Balletto Vineyards, to corporate-owned conglomerates, such as Constellation Brands’ Clos du Bois winery in Geyserville. They all reveal the strength of Sonoma County’s appellations, with the lion’s share from grapes groomed in the Russian River, Alexander and Dry Creek valleys.

The top 10 wineries that reeled in the most gold-level awards were: Matrix Winery, 10; Mazzocco Winery, 10; Wilson Winery, 10; Pezzi King, nine; Soda Rock Winery, nine; Mayo Family Winery, seven; St. Anne’s Crossing Winery, seven; Benziger Family Winery, six; Davis Family Vineyards, six; and DeLoach Vineyards, six.

In this top 10 grouping, comprising 80 gold-medal wines, 55 were produced by wineries owned by vintners Ken and Diane Wilson. The Sonoma County wineries include Wilson, Matrix, Mazzocco, Pezzi King, Soda Rock and St. Anne's Crossing.

But the most prestigious sweepstakes winners are still under wraps. Those three awards — for best white, red and specialty wines — will be drawn from the pool of 40 Best of Class wines and will be announced at the Harvest Awards Night Gala on Sept. 27.



There were 1,189 award-winning wines, given in the categories of Best of Class, Gold, Silver and Bronze. A total of 629 silver and 205 bronze medals were awarded. Among 1,254 entries, only 65 wines received no award. [To search our database of award winners, click here.](#)

Christopher Sawyer, a judge and founder of SawyerSomm.com, said the wines showed so well because they hail from strong Sonoma County vintages — 2012, 2013 and 2014.

“There were some stunners in there,” Sawyer said. “They were tasty across the board. ... The rosés were so beautiful and dry. The white wines were aromatic with natural acidity, brightness and freshness. The red wines had deep cherry and blackberry notes.”

Several judges noticed an uptick in quality; they said this year the rosés were dry and vibrant, the zinfandels seemed less manipulated, the chardonnays were less oaky, and the petite sirahs had tamed tannins.

Bob Foster, a panelist, was one of the impressed. The assistant editor of the California Grapevine Newsletter said the contest “is a step up in quality” because it’s limited to grapes groomed in the premier growing region of Sonoma County.

Foster said the judges tasted fewer wines per day this year — just over 100 — but it still required them to give their full attention to each wine.

“You can get palate fatigue and mental fatigue,” Foster said. “You have to concentrate. You have to think about sensations you’re getting in your mouth and your olfactory system.”

The idea of holding back the sweepstakes winners until the Sept. 27 gala was adopted last year to “increase the excitement around the sweepstakes winners and the gala,” said Bob Fraser, head coordinator of the competition. “It builds that ground level of enthusiasm.”



Laurie Ferguson pours a flight of wine for the judges at the Sonoma County Harvest Fair wine competition. (JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat)

The format also helps area retailers who, in the past, braced for a crush of customers when all the winners were announced at once. This two-part approach allows them to stock their shelves with many of the award-winning wines two full weeks before the Harvest Fair on Oct. 2-4.

Ben Pearson, wine buyer at Santa Rosa’s Bottle Barn, said, “Monday will be my single biggest wine-buying day of the year. ... Some people come in from out of town and they’re buying multiple cases for holiday parties or gifts. A gold-medal wine is a guarantee of quality.”

Kristi Mohar, wine buyer and manager of Pacific Markets in Sebastopol and Santa Rosa, said she’ll also be stocking up on the winners.

“It’s pretty big for local markets, for sure,” Mohar said. “I definitely see an increase in sales. After Christmas and Thanksgiving, then there’s Harvest Fair. What makes Harvest Fair unique is that sales are pretty consistent for about a month.”

The wine competition culminates in the Harvest Awards Night Gala, a coming-out party for the sweepstakes-winning red, white and specialty wines — a category that includes sparkling wines, late-harvest dessert wines, ports and rosés.

The evening also will celebrate the county’s top winemakers, growers, microbrewers and culinary artists.

The gala, which begins at 4:30 p.m., is at Santa Rosa’s Wells Fargo Center. While the dinner is sold out, \$75 tickets are still available for the reception and awards ceremony.

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