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PRUNING PRO CLIPS COMPETITION: KNIGHTS VALLEY VINEYARD WORKER TAKES \$1,000



Fernando Gutierrez of Vinepro Vineyard Management took top honors



Pruning judge Ray Sanchez goes over the ground rules

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Photos by Ken Porter

Top professional pruners put their skills to the test on Sonoma County vineyards Friday, shearing their way through a tough, timed competition for cash prizes. With a few sharp clips, Fernando Gutierrez, a 35-year-old vineyard worker from Knights Valley, took home first prize, earning points for both speed and quality.

Good pruning is valued in vineyards, where speed and quality are of equal importance. Vine pruning is the groundwork for the next grape harvest, and the quality of pruning can determine the quality of wine produced.

“The harvest is the most rewarding, but this is what the harvest depends on,” said John Tankersley with Trione Vineyards and Winery. “You’ve got to make a quick decision about what to cut, and after you cut it, you can’t get it back.”

The 10 participants who took part in the 10th annual Sonoma County Pruning Contest on Friday were the top pruners in five competitions leading up to the finals. Two workers from each of Sonoma

County's wine-growing regions competed in pruning three vines. All contestants finished in less than three minutes.

In addition to Gutierrez's first-place finish, Javier Lopez of Russian River Valley placed second, Adam Paz of Sonoma Valley placed third and Manuel Chavez, also of Sonoma Valley, placed fourth. Gutierrez, with eight years of pruning experience, was surprised to take first place. Last year, though he made it to the finals, he placed ``somewhere near the bottom," he said.

``This year I've had a lot of practice," he said in Spanish. ``I've been working a lot and paying a lot of attention. Anyone who wants to do this work needs to pay attention and give it everything." Gutierrez was joined at the competition by his 11-year-old son, Luis, who was impressed with his father's win.

``I want to be just like him when I grow up," the younger Gutierrez said. ``I'm already learning, and he's teaching me, but it's hard work. This morning we got up at 5:30 to go prune before we came to the competition." Gutierrez received \$1,000 from the Sonoma County Winegrape Commission for his win. A portion of the money, he said, would go toward celebrating his daughter's quinceanera, or 15th birthday party, in May, he said.



Fernando Gutierrez and his son