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A Mapping Quest

New Internet program Winemap.org could change the way growers, tasters view the county

By KEVIN MCCALLUM THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

A Windsor map company is on a quest to create some of the most detailed views ever of the landscape that produces some of the finest wines in the nation.

Teaming with vineyard owners around Sonoma County, The Map Store on Thursday unveiled a powerful new Internet mapping tool it hopes will revolutionize the way people share information about the local wine industry.

"No other wine region in the world has anything like this," said Jordan Thomas, project manager for The Map Store.

Hundreds of grape growers got their first peek at the project Thursday at the Sonoma County Wine Grape Commission's Dollars and \$ense trade show at the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts.

The commission is helping fund the development of the Web site, winemap.org. The online maps will help growers market their grapes while making it easier for wine drinkers to learn more about the origins of the grapes that went into their favorite vintages.

What makes the Web-based tool unique is that grape growers are being asked to upload information about their farming operations to help make the maps the most detailed ever produced.

"These maps will only be as good as the information you put into them," Nick Frey, president of the commission, told members.

For growers, the key benefit of the maps will be to help them market their grapes, Frey said. Growers will be able to submit detailed information about their vineyard operations, including acreage, slope, varieties and type of vine clones planted. When growers find themselves looking for buyers for their grapes, the hope is the maps will create an exciting virtual grape marketplace.

Susan Lentz, a grower in the Dry Creek Valley, said she plans to enter as much information as she can about her 35 acres of grapes, some of which she's had difficulty selling in recent years.

Her hillside cabernet sauvignon, merlot and sangiovese have done fine, but her merlot and syrah on the valley floor have had a tougher time, she said.

"I'm hoping that this will help make information about my vineyards more widely available," she said.

Even though the site is in the testing phase, Frey said he is certain growers will be pleased with the results.

"The growers in the county are going to benefit greatly from this," Frey said.

He declined to specify how much the commission contributed to the development of the project, but said it was less than 10 percent of the total cost. The Map Store is bearing the majority of the development costs, he said.

But those costs are far lower than they would have been without the voluntary participation of growers, Thomas said.

Since 1997, The Map Store has created a popular series of maps of various grape-growing areas of Sonoma County, largely by gathering information in public records.

In 2004, the store created an online database of the information behind the maps. At that point, Thomas realized

the potential to greatly expand the database and find inventive ways to present the information.

Key to that expansion is partnering with the grape growers, whose knowledge of the land is unsurpassed, Thomas said.

"When the vineyard owner goes there to map out his land, they know up to the minute what is going on," Thomas said.

Other organizations have put together lists of vineyards and wineries, and some have even put them online. But none have integrated the information with a powerful, searchable online map program in the way winemap.org has, Thomas said.

"My theory was, because it's possible, someone will do it, and if anyone was going to do it, I wanted to be the one to do it," said Thomas, 25.

For Thomas, a cartographer by training, it was completely natural to present information about the wine industry in map form.

"Because wine is so influenced by its geography, maps seem like the perfect way to present additional information about wine and vineyards," he said.

It also makes good business sense for The Map Store. The company is owned by a Cloverdale engineering firm, DobleThomas & Associates, that does a lot of work in the industry.

The company hasn't quite figured out how to monetize its investment in the map tool, but will likely sell advertising on the site someday, he said.

But even if the site isn't self-sufficient, DobleThomas hopes the goodwill it forms with grape growers reaps additional rewards.

"They definitely see a benefit from having good relations with the vineyard community," Thomas said.

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