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# Hilling vines helps ensure their survival over winter

BY ELEANOR AND RAY HEALD

SPECIAL WRITER

Always a willing spokesman for winegrowing in Michigan is Dave Braganini, president of St. Julian Wine Co., Michigan's largest winery. "On the vines, all buds below the snowline survived," he reported.

"When the 20 below zero temperature hit, there was on average 18 inches to two feet of snow cover. Every vine on the 15 acres planted last year is fine. These new vines were all under the snow."

These plantings indicate that for the future St. Julian is hitching its success wagon to riesling, merlot, cabernet franc and chardonnay.

Some growers in southwest Michigan are now considering hilling vinifera vines to ensure

winter survival. This is a labor intensive and time-consuming effort. "It's expensive," Braganini said, but "losing an entire crop is even more costly. Some growers may take chances and not bury their vines. Such serious winter kill of vinifera varieties was never a serious threat before the past winter."

Bruce Zababadi reported that new equipment is being developed to make the task of hilling vines somewhat easier. He also said that none of the 3,200 vinifera vines planted in spring 1993 were lost. "These were principally merlot and cabernet franc," he said. "Newer plantings by Michigan State Horticulture Department of pinot noir, muscat ottonal and cabernet franc suffered only 10 percent bud mortality."

It was not just vinifera that suf-

fered. "Hybrids are experiencing crown gall," Braganini told us. This is not uncommon after severe winters. At the site of the disease, trunk cambium layers under the bark split, and the vine is then subject to other diseases and loss of its vascular system.

Because St. Julian is so large in comparison to the state's other wineries, Braganini says he's not worried at this time. But he cautions consumers to not look for any big sales of Michigan wines in late summer and early fall. "Since we know it will be a short crop in 1994, wineries will be attempting to stretch their inventories," he said.

This may be hard to do if St. Julian, in particular, continues its growth spiral. May 1994 sales were up 38 percent over a year ago, and St. Julian's Detroit-metro area distributor sold more St. Julian wines in the first six days of June than it did in all of June 1993. These wines are hot!

The St. Julian Village Wines have a new, attractive, upscale label. "I'm most pleased about our Village wines together with Great White and Simply Red," Braganini said. "I'm pleased to make such a good product so inexpensively. People are recognizing their value in the under \$5 category."

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