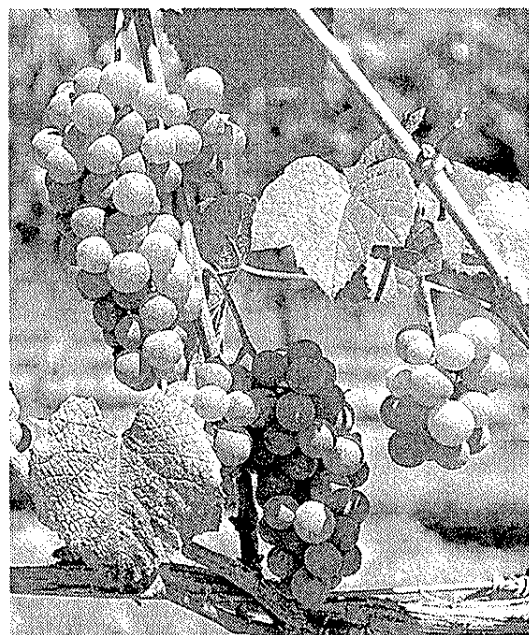




BRUCE PARKER/TIMES-DISPATCH

At the Riverside Logistics warehouse in Henrico County, new oak wine barrels await shipment to a number of wineries in Virginia and elsewhere.

Wine time in Virginia



JOE MAHONEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

Grapes ripen on the vine at Mediterranean Cellars, a winery in Warrenton.

Virginia grapes

Virginia vineyards produced 5,600 tons of grapes last year on 2,000 acres at an average value of \$1,360 per ton. Here are the top five wine-grape varieties grown in the state, last year's tonnage and the value:

- **Chardonnay:** 1,145 tons; \$1,389 per ton
- **Cabernet Franc:** 751 tons; \$1,442 per ton
- **Merlot:** 731 tons; \$1,613 per ton
- **Cabernet Sauvignon:** 448 tons; \$1,619 per ton
- **Vidal Blanc:** 431 tons; \$843 per ton

SOURCE: Virginia Agricultural Statistics Service

Because of the hot summer, the Virginia grape harvest likely will begin a week ahead of normal; the quality looks promising.

Grape harvest is at hand; it could be a good year

BY GREG EDWARDS
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

At a warehouse near Richmond International Airport, rows of oak barrels await shipment to wineries in Virginia and other Eastern states.

The French- and American-made barrels come to the Riverside Logistics' warehouse on Eubank Road in shipping containers from the port at Hampton Roads and from a Pennsylvania cooperage, or barrel maker.

The 60- to 80-gallon barrels arrive each year at midsummer, in time for the fall grape harvest. They are shipped out quickly, in some cases to wineries as far away as Michigan and New York.

In Virginia this year, it appears the grape harvest will begin a week ahead of normal, probably because of this summer's hot, dry weather, said state viticulturist Tony K. Wolf, who also serves as director of the state agriculture experiment station in Winchester.

The harvest will begin next week in southern Virginia and will run through October in the northern part of the state. Because of additional vineyard acreage coming into production, the quantity of this year's crop might be greater than last year's 5,600 tons, Wolf said.

The quality of this year's harvest looks promising, he said, but that could change if the state gets too much rain before the end of the harvest. Drier weather at this time of year helps enhance the flavor of grapes.

By the time of harvest and the crushing of grapes, the wineries should have a pretty good idea how this year's wine will turn out. The art of winemaking begins with having high quality fruit, Wolf said.

Lee Reeder, a co-owner and winemaker at Burnley Vineyards in Barbourville, said this year reminds him of 1998, one of his best years for red wine.

In 1998, like this year, the growing season was bone-dry, Reeder said. In 1998, the remnants of a hurricane brought enough rain to the 31-acre vineyard be-

fore season's end to produce a good harvest. Reeder would like to see a repeat this year.

"If we could get a good half-inch to three-quarters-inch soaker, we would be fat and happy through September," Reeder said. "If we had six days of rain we would have a lousy season. . . . The berries would start to split."

Eight miles to the west of Reeder, in Greene County, Edward Schwab of Autumn Hill Vineyards said he also would like to see some rain.

After a mild winter, a frostless late spring and an early summer with ample rain, Schwab's mature grapevines are bearing some of the best fruit he has had in 27 years of operation. Younger plants, three and four years old, are showing the stress of dry weather, however, and are dropping their leaves.

Schwab said he would be harvesting Chardonnay grapes in about two weeks and his red grapes in about a month. "What the harvest is going to be, we don't know. We're keeping our fingers crossed," he said.

Schwab recently took delivery of half a dozen French-crafted barrels from Riverside Logistics. He prefers the French oak because it has a tighter grain than American oak and contributes a little vanilla flavor to the wine.

Barrel making involves bending the staves just right over a fire or in hot water, then slowly toasting the barrel over an oak fire to caramelize the natural sugars in the wood.

Riverside, a company that specializes in transportation management, has been handling wine barrels for four years, according to warehouse manager Beth Delaney. So far this year, roughly 600 barrels have come through the warehouse.

Saury, a maker of French oak barrels, has decided to store barrels with the eastern Henrico County company year round so it can shorten delivery times for its customers, Delaney said.

• Contact staff writer Greg Edwards at gedwards@timesdispatch.com or (804) 649-6390.