



## Pruning skills put to test in 11th annual Napa County Pruning Contest

CHANTAL M. LOVELL | Posted: Thursday, February 9, 2012 3:05 pm

How fast can you prune a vine?

One minute? Thirty seconds? Fifteen?

About 80 vineyard workers took that challenge Thursday morning at the 11th annual Napa County Pruning Contest hosted by the Napa Valley Grapegrowers. The contest, held at Beringer Vineyard's Gamble Ranch in Yountville, gave the workers a chance to strut their skill in exchange for coveted prizes, including a champion belt buckle engraved for the event.

"One of our platforms at the grapegrowers is to highlight and really elevate the farmworker in this industry, and I think that's really resonating with people," said Jennifer Putnam, executive director of the grapegrowers organization. "They're starting to honor them for their dedication and skill. ... We've have more support from spectators than I've ever seen."

The dozens of viewers mingled with the participants as they waited for their heats. Some chatted, others sharpened tools, many stood anxious with shears and gloves in hand as music played in the background.

"These guys are working really hard throughout the year so it's really neat to see them grouped together and talk amongst each other," said event committee member Paul Goldberg, of Bettinelli Vineyard Management.

Gera Cortes, 24, of Trincherro Family Vineyards, said he thought he did well in his first year at the competition but had no idea how he'd fare against more seasoned competitors. He entered the competition to try something new, he said, and hopefully win prizes, which included money, tools, vests and other items.

Each vineyard was allowed to send three contestants, one more than what was allowed in previous years. Between 30 and 40 vineyards were represented Tuesday.

"It gives us an opportunity to bring together some of these folks that don't get to see each other too often together in a great environment, share some stories, prune some vines and have a little competition," Goldberg said.

Each contestant was timed pruning six vines, which were then reviewed by a team of three judges.

"We're making sure they're cutting off all of the water sprouts, making sure they're leaving only two clear buds, removing all the debris from under the vine as well as the trellis," said judge Rolando Sanchez, of Walsh Vineyard Management, Inc.

Though most contestants only spent 15 to 20 seconds pruning each vine, he said the quality of work was very good.

"We've got a lot of good, quality pruners today," he said.

Amador Reges, 28, of Colinas Farming Company in Rutherford, said he came to put his skills to the test and to learn from other participants.

All contestants had to meet a minimum quality score to be eligible for the finals, Putnam said. The eight fastest pruners and the eight pruners who displayed the work of the highest quality competed in the finals.

The top four winners received prizes, with first-place winner Jose Juan Tellez, of Gallegos Vineyards, receiving \$600, a custom belt buckle, shears, a Central Valley Builders Supply vest and a jacket.

"It's amazing the talent we have within our labor in the Valley," said event chairwoman Mary Maher of Harlan Estate. "Pruning is a real art and guys take real pride in what they do and how they do it and in speed and accuracy. It's a fun competition."