

Stompin' good time

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A field of 16 teams crushed 320 pounds of grapes at the second annual North Dakota Wine and Grape Harvest Festival before a West Fargo couple won a tie-breaking stompoff and took the title of grape-stomping champions Saturday.

The festival is hosted by Red Trail Vineyard near Buffalo and wraps up tonight.

Jason Swart stomped the grapes in a giant bucket as wife Jill pushed them under his feet. They produced 6 pounds, 5 ounces of juice.

"I tried to use all my toes," Jason said. "I wasn't just using the balls of my feet."

But that wasn't enough to take the title as Shari Nitzkowski of Fargo and Paula Brown of Savage, Minn., matched them ounce for ounce. Nitzkowski was the stomper and Brown the grape pusher.

In the stomp-off, Nitzkowski and Brown surprised the audience by switching places during the one-and-a-half minute stomp-off.

But that clever move wasn't enough as the Swarts won the tiebreaker by 6 ounces.

Jason said his small feet helped him and his wife claim the title.

"I think it's pounds-per-square inch," he said.

The winning team took home a prize pack that included a month of free tanning and several other gift certificates. The runners-up also got a prize pack.

The win didn't come easy. A-minute-and-a-half of constant stomping is tough.

"We have several paramedics here on standby," joked Rodney Hogen, who emceed the competition and co-owns the vineyard with brother Steve.

Terri Krovoza of Jamestown, N.D., was sucking air after her team's turn at the competition.

"I never thought a minute-and-a-half could be so long," she said.

In addition to Saturday's stomp, the festival also features three bluegrass concerts, free caricature drawings, a magic show, games for children and, of course, a wine and beer garden. Children's and seniors' stomps are set for today.

There are also food vendors and craft booths on site.

Attendance is "a lot better than last year," Rodney Hogen said. Yesterday afternoon, he estimated that twice as many had come through the gates this year as by the same time last year.

Almost 300 attended last year, when it was only a one-day event, Hogen said.

The primary purpose of the two-day festival is to promote North Dakota's fledgling grape-growing industry, Steve Hogen said.

"Yeah, if we can make some money (with the festival), that's great too," he said, but he wasn't sure whether the event would end up in the black this year.

Rodney Hogen is the president of the North Dakota Grape Growers Association and said the oldest significant wine vineyard he knows of in North Dakota wasn't started until 1997.

North Dakota is a "brand new state" in terms of grape production, Rodney said.

Red Trail planted its first vines in 2003 and sold its first bottle of wine this year. It currently sends its grapes to be processed off site but plans eventually to have its own winery at the vineyard, Steve said.

As for growing grapes in the frigid climate of North Dakota, Steve said most of the vines can withstand temperatures to 35 or 40 below zero, and, if the temperatures drop below that, they can pack them in snow to insulate them.

Moorhead residents Nate and Paula Aalgaard drove in for the festivities.

They were "looking for something to do today," she said.

Nate considers himself something of an amateur wine connoisseur and was enjoying the bright blue skies and comfy temperatures with a glass of wine Saturday.

"It's nice to have different events to go to in the area," he said "I think it adds to the whole culture of the area to have these kinds of things."

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