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Sonoma County Grape Growers Foundation Celebrates Forty-Four Employees from 2020 for Outstanding Work and Announces Vineyard Employee of the Year

Juan Sanchez of Dutton Ranch Recognized as Sonoma County's Vineyard Employee of the Year

SANTA ROSA, Calif. (November 8, 2021) – In just three years it has become one of the most innovative and prestigious awards in the winegrape industry. “It” is the Sonoma County Grape Grower Foundation’s Vineyard Employee Recognition program and, this past weekend, forty-four men and women who excel in grape growing in Sonoma County were honored at the home of the Sonoma County Winegrape Foundation, Sunnyview Vineyards, in front of their families, winegrape growers, community leaders and Congressman Mike Thompson.

“This is one of our most beloved programs. We are so honored to recognize our talented ag employees who excel in leadership, innovation, safety and conservation, in addition, to their outstanding vineyard skills,” said Karissa Kruse, president of Sonoma County Winegrowers and the executive director of the Sonoma County Grape Grower Foundation. She added, “these individuals help to make Sonoma County both a special place and a world-renowned winegrowing region.”

The recognition program was started in 2018 to honor the men and women who excel in growing the world’s highest quality sustainable winegrapes. All full-time, part-time, and seasonal employees working in Sonoma County agriculture for a vineyard owner, vineyard management company or winery are eligible for the award. Individuals are nominated by their employers each month throughout the year to recognize their various skills, achievements, and exceptional performance in different areas. Monthly themes include leadership, innovation, safety, conservation, pruning, canopy management and harvest. Throughout the year, monthly winners receive gift cards as well as being recognized in the local community via newspaper advertisements and articles.

Award winners are joined by their families and nominating vineyard managers to revel and celebrate over lunch and live music. Saturday’s celebration was long-delayed from February 2021 due to COVID-19.

Sonoma County Grape Growers Foundation officially announced Juan Sanchez, of Dutton Ranch, as the winner of its third Vineyard Employee of the Year award.

Juan came to Dutton Ranch from Jalisco, Mexico, as a 19-year-old young man in 1969. He started working for Warren & Gail Dutton in their farming business with wine grapes, apples, prunes pears and walnuts. Not only has Juan seen many changes in Sonoma County, but also the changes at Dutton Ranch and has worked alongside the family through it all as the family transitioned the older crops into premium wine grapes and organic apples.

Over the years, Juan started out as field worker, was then promoted to tractor operator and to crew leader. Juan was always willing to jump in and help however he could. So, as the ranch continued to grow, it became apparent that a Head Supervisor was needed, Juan was the obvious choice for the position which he has now held for the past 25-years.

As Juan grew in his 52-year career, he was watching Warren & Gail's sons, Joe & Steve, grow up and worked side-by-side with them. Steve and Joe attribute so much about what they know of farming from working alongside Juan.

"Juan has been an integral part of Dutton Ranch – his leadership, his integrity and his work ethic have helped shape our business and both me and my brother Joe," commented Steve Dutton. Juan is a part of our family and undoubtedly a large part of the success of the ranch."

In addition, Joe and Steve Dutton own a ranch with Juan and his brother-in-law. This is a unique model and recognizes how integral Juan is to the family.

Juan has been talking about retiring for the last three years. Finally, in 2020, he told Joe and Steve he was going to retire just before harvest. His retirement lasted just three days. On the fourth day, Juan showed up again with the condition that he wanted to start harvesting at 6 am instead of 2 am. Joe and Steve are so grateful to have his continued help and expertise. It will be a sad day here when Juan officially retires.

After his stellar career in Sonoma County and with Dutton Ranch, Juan Sanchez, is more than deserving of this Vineyard Employee of the Year award. The Sonoma County Grape Growers Foundation is proud to honor Juan and the other 43 Employee Recognition award winners at this event.

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About the Sonoma County Grape Growers Foundation:

The Sonoma County Grape Growers Foundation (SCGGF) was first established in 2002 as a 501(c)(3) organization to help fund educational workshops in Spanish for agricultural employees. Relunched in January of 2016, SCGGF is focused on improving the lives of Sonoma County's agricultural employees and their families, while ensuring Sonoma County remains a place where agricultural workers will continue to live, work, and thrive. Since its relaunch SCGGF has continuously proven it has a unique model of outreach and support, recognizing and relying on the trusted relationship that farmers have with their employees. SCGGF collaborates with various community-based organizations and agencies to identify existing resources, leverage available support, and create new programs to assist local agricultural employees and their families. This includes a focus on healthcare, affordable housing, childcare, education, recovery and resiliency, and workforce development. The Foundation is managed by the Sonoma County Winegrowers with an 18-member board of directors comprised of agricultural leaders, vineyard and winery owners, and Sonoma County community leaders.