

Mark Pasternak planted pinot noir grapes on a hill above Nicasio in 1980 and changed the face of West Marin wine forever. Pinot is one of the most challenging grapes to grow and for years growers considered the Marin climate too cold and damp to produce a good pinot.

"We're on the edge," said Pasternak, who now grows 14 acres of pinot noir grapes and four of chardonnay on his ranch, Devil's Gulch. "Some people could even say we're over the edge."

Recently, more grape growers have joined Pasternak on the edge. Grape acreage increased more than 50% from 2005 to 2006, according to a county crop report due out later this month. Most of this increase can be attributed to two new vineyards, one in Lucas Valley and one in Hicks Valley. Both were planned by Pasternak, and represent a trend towards planting grapes in cooler climates in the quest to develop the perfect pinot.

### Farming on the edge

The road to Devil's Gulch crosses a creek, climbs a dusty lane lined with eucalyptus then passes through a lush glen of ferns and oaks. Pasternak's pickup

sagged under the weight of several tons of tortillas as it climbed this route last Monday. He stepped out wearing dark shades, a white cowboy hat and mud-stained work boots. A giant metal belt buckle gleamed in the sun. The tortillas, refuse from a San Rafael restaurant, were to feed his pigs, which are bought by Marin Sun Farms. He also raises rabbits, whose meat is served at French Laundry, the premiere Napa restaurant, but growing grapes is where he has attracted the most attention. Roughly two-thirds of Marin grapes are grown or managed by Pasternak.

While standing in the shadow of an 80-foot windmill, which provides power for his ranch, he pointed out his domain. Across the valley was a golden hill capped in rows of green, the Chalone Vineyard, which he manages. On an adjacent hill was Skywalker Ranch, where Pasternak helped put in 20 acres of pinot two years ago.

"You wanna be up there but not so far up there that you're catching the breeze," said Pasternak.

Well-drained hilltops are better for