

The Wines of Texas

Written by Terry Connor

Tuesday, 28 February 2012 15:02

Franco and I are headed south. Franco has an idea in his head to explore the wines of Texas. It is not a bad idea. (I bet he secretly wants to try one of Debbi Covington's Tex-Mex recipes, which is also not a bad idea.) While driving, Franco asked me why I write about wine. Has not every wine and winery in the world had something written about it? The answer is probably "yes."

However, I enjoy reading the history of each winery and wine area. The stories of the beginnings of the successful wineries almost always include a tale of hands-on hard work, a spirit of adventure, passion about wine, and risk. And then there is the fact that each year brings forth a new vintage. When you think about it, it is really simple. Some folks enjoy Nuclear Physics; I enjoy reading and hearing everything about wine.

Wines from Texas? That's right, partner. Wine has been produced on Texas soil since the 1600s, starting with the Spanish Monks and continuing to this day. The first two hundred years were routine with only local production and local consumption. Moving forward to the late 1800s, we find the Phylloxera Aphid outbreak was running crazy in Europe, destroying thousands of acres of wine rootstock. Concurrent with this, a horticulturalist by the name of Thomas Munson was working in Denison, Texas. His expertise was in breeding grapes for wine. He was aware of the Phylloxera outbreak and developed a rootstock that was resistant to the dreaded aphid. His work had worldwide implications and was met with great success. For his efforts, he was awarded the Chevalier du Merite Agricole of the French Legion of Honor, and Texas had a new Favorite Son. Munson was working with Grayson College in Denison. His work is permanently stored there.

Wine drinkers may find it surprising to learn that fine wine – or for that matter, *any wine at all* – is produced in Texas. I must admit that I was as guilty as anyone. Early wine from Texas was

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not very good at all. However, it did have a purpose in that it satisfied the needs of the Church and the Spanish Conquistadores. In Karen MacNiel's book,

The Wine Bible,

she points out that many attempts to improve on the quality of the wine were met with failure – including the efforts by the early settlers who brought vines from their respective homelands, hoping to recreate their food and culture. This was a failure in that the vines perished as a result of pests, foreign disease and the harsh climate of Texas. Later on, in the nineteenth century, as new immigrants from Italy, Germany, and France brought more European grape varieties, the same failure occurred. Alas, the folks in Texas, determined to have wine, produced it from a local grape called “Mustang.” It must have been terrible stuff. I can't reference to it anywhere.

Local grapes of the mustang type were the norm until 1973. That year, a Texas cattle rancher by the name of Edward Auler went to France with his wife Susan, in search of a new breed of cattle. During that same time, the Aulers tasted a great deal of wine. One day, they were standing outside one of the most famous wineries in Burgundy called Clos de Vougeot. They noticed that the granite limestone and the topography reminded them of their ranch in the Hill Country of Texas. Making a very large ,Texas-size statement, they said,“We can do that.” And do that they did! Fall Creek Vineyards was born and the Texas wine boom had started. Fall Creek Vineyards produces Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Tempranillo, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and Shiraz. Most of the wine is sold in restaurants and through their wine club. You may order online. I recommend the White Sampler. It is a good wine value.

An additional, and very important, winery is Llano Estacado. It is the second largest winery in Texas. Starting out as a science project by two college professors that planted at least 100 varieties of grapes, it soon became a successful winery. Today, Llano Estacado produces 25 different wines. The most important are Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Merlot, Riesling, and Port. The winery is presently not shipping to South Carolina. However, they are planning to in the future. My hope is that they are able to ship as I have tasted their wines. They are pleasant tasting and very competitive in price. Good wine values.

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I bring these two wineries to your attention as examples of the Texas Spirit. The vintners were not afraid to experiment and found commercial success with many different varietals. The Texas story is now told with over 300 wineries. It is the fifth largest wine producing state in America. Although my tasting experience of Texas wines is limited, I hope that they find success in distribution to South Carolina.

A sad Current Event. Recently the Lowcountry Wine Company on Bay Street closed down. I cannot testify as to the quality of their wine however, the more important point is that Beaufort has lost a business. Very sad indeed! Wherever Lowcountry Wine goes I wish them well.

Next stop is Virginia!