

New is Old

by Paul Ross

Here's a "Geeks Who Drink" trivia question, "What's the oldest wine region in the US?"

Answer: New Mexico. With less than one tenth of one percent of the total of today's estimated \$37 billion American wine industry, the state is small in production but big in history.

It all began back in 1629—a full 140 years before viticulture came to California— with the arrival of the Spanish who journeyed northeast, up from their conquests in Mexico. Along with adventuring soldiers seeking gold, the priests sought souls and found them in the indigenous Indians who sparsely populated the region. These first European explorers had an alcohol problem -- there wasn't enough of it. Sacramental wine had been shipped from Spain in green glazed stoneware jugs similar to what the Romans had used and, just as with the Romans, lead leached into the liquid during the long trip and, even with 18% alcohol and 10% sugar content, transmuted the wine into more penance than pleasure. Even so, for the purpose intended, the supply was short. But the powers that were in Spain wanted to maintain tight control of their winemaking, and it meant that the far-flung vanguardians of the church had to suffer. Determination, religious or otherwise, trumped commerce and vines were smuggled to the new world. Two monks are credited with first introducing the *Vitis Vinifera* (mission

grape --which some historians believe is the Spanish “Monica” variety.) Wine production for all the churches in the expanding territory was in place by 1633 and, in 1800, leagues of vineyards followed the twisting course of the Rio Grande.

In 1868 Jesuit monks refined the cow skin-filtered wine with techniques imported from Italy. It was a big improvement. Wine wasn't just for mass anymore.

Hardy grapes and hardier pioneer people eked a largely agrarian existence out of soil that was often rocky, dry, and had deposits of *caliche*, a clay-like material that can be as impenetrable as cast cement. There were droughts and harsh winters. But nature wasn't the only adversary that the early settlers faced. Bands of nomadic Comanche, Navajo and Apache Indians swept through the territory with such regularity and thoroughness that, in 1812, wine was the outpost's *only* revenue-producing crop (at around 1600 gallons). By the late 1800's, it was pretty much over for the raiding parties and the original indigenous populace, as superior weaponry and disease ended their struggles and forever altered their traditional ways of life.

Change seemed to be what the region's early history was all about. Following Spanish and Mexican rule, it became a territory under American control. (So American, in fact, that the westernmost battle of the Civil War took place in what is now Pecos, New Mexico.) And through it all, wine survived and prospered. In 1880 there were nearly 3200 acres of vineyards,

(double that of New York state at the time) four years later New Mexico was fifth in the nation in wine production at almost a million gallons. New Mexico became the 47th state in 1912 and hopes were high that regional winemakers would prosper in an expanded market.

But, as the old Farmers' Almanac saying goes, "Man Proposes, Nature Disposes." And that she did, as the Rio Grande surged to mighty river proportions, laying down sediment and raising waters to flood levels. This happened several times and what vines weren't washed-away outright, succumbed to root rot. The year 1920 produced no wine. Rugged frontier spirit refused to be put down when stubborn farmers replanted their grapes. Surprisingly, *during* Prohibition, New Mexico's vineyard acreage nearly doubled. And again hopes and fortunes were dashed as the Rio, in an act of God, did what the act of Volstead could not and all of the old vines were destroyed.

It wasn't until 1977 that the state's viticultural rebirth began in the way it's known today. French hybrid varietals were planted by La Viña Winery, which is still in operation. Aware of the region's past winemaking success and lured by inexpensive land, outsiders —particularly experienced European vintners and venture capitalists— entered and soon independent wineries dotted the New Mexico landscape.

Gordon Steel of the Rio Grande Winery in Las Cruces comments, “A lot of those collapsed by the 80’s, due to poor infrastructure. Some were bought up and are part of the basis of what remains today.”

Now there are close to 60 wineries, many small independents and some larger, such as Gruet and St. Clair/New Mexico Wineries labels, producing in excess of half-a-million gallons yearly from more than 70 grape varieties. World-class winemakers consult with, train producers of and, themselves, own vineyards and award-winning wineries which are scattered from *la frontera* with old Mexico to the border of Colorado in four distinct regions and many microclimates. There are six related festivals, including Santa Fe’s big annual Wine & Chile Fiesta. And wines from the state rack up high points in prestigious publications and show up on menus from coast-to-coast. And there’s even a “Wine Passport” for traveling the New Mexico Wine Trail.

New Mexico, America’s oldest wine region, is back and, again, making history.

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