

COLORADO'S WINE INDUSTRY BEGINNING TO MATURE

by Rich Mauro

Harvest is a great time to acquaint ourselves with the fine agricultural products of our state and this is especially so with wine. Two of the best ways I know of to do that are at the Colorado Mountain Winefest, which held its fifteenth anniversary in the Grand Junction/Palisade area September 14-17, and the Harvest Fest at the Winery at Holy Cross Abbey, which held its fourth anniversary September 22-24.

The activities at Winefest kicked off Thursday with golf and wine at Redlands Mesa Golf Course and continued Friday with seminars on wine and food pairing, grape growing and winemaking, and a chocolate and wine tasting at the Enstrom Candies headquarters.

Winefest crested on Saturday with a series of events, beginning with a bike tour through the vineyards of Palisade and including a seminar on the importance of quality wine glasses by the Riedel crystal company. The showcase event of the weekend was the Festival in the Park in Palisade. There were 43 wineries and over 50 artisans and gourmet food producers spread through the park, and around 7000 people (1,000 more than last year) clearly having a great time.

Sunday brought no simple wind down of festivities. After a Winemakers Brunch, there was an amateur winemakers competition and wineries throughout Mesa, Delta and Montrose counties opened their gates to visitors for vineyard and winery tours, entertainment and special wine deals.

And, as if all that wasn't enough, every evening throughout Winefest there were winemaker dinners at local restaurants.

What a great way to display the improving quality of Colorado wines. And the proof was in the bottle. Although I did taste several average wines and a few just plain bad wines, I also came upon an encouragingly wide range of good wines.

The Winefest is maybe the most visible example of how the Colorado wine industry has matured in the last decade, an industry was virtually nonexistent before 1990. Although commercial grape growing dates to 1883, the industry died with Prohibition and didn't show signs of life again until 1968 with the opening of Ivancie winery. But only a handful of wineries opened from the late 1970s until 1990.

Yet today, the Colorado wine industry is now the fastest growing agricultural

segment in the state, according to the Colorado Wine Industry Development Board. The board's Executive Director, Doug Caskey, says that there are now 64 wineries (and counting), which compares to about half a dozen in 1990.

Production has increased an average of more than 20 percent over each of the last 14 years. There were about 12,500 cases produced in fiscal year 1995 and 91,000 in fiscal year 2006. An estimated 160 grape growers currently tend 850 acres (with 700 of a producing age), harvesting about 1350 tons in 2005, and they probably will exceed 1600 tons this year, according to Caskey.

The vast majority of that production, according to the 2005 Grower Survey, comes from Mesa County and Delta County, which produce 83 percent and 11 percent respectively of all Colorado wine grapes. This isn't a surprise, since they house Colorado's two federally designated American Viticultural Areas (AVAs). Mesa County includes the Grand Valley, which stretches along the Colorado River between Palisade and Grand Junction, and Delta County includes the West Elks AVA, which straddles the North Fork of the Gunnison River between Paonia and Hotchkiss. The rest is spread among the Front Range, Rocky Mountains, and the Four Corners.

A study by Colorado State University estimates the wine industry's contribution to Colorado's economy (based on \$11.8 million in wine sales for fiscal year 2005) to be \$21.1 million, including the indirect effects of wine production. That same year, wine-based tourism (tasting room visits, wine festivals, wine trains and educational programs) accounted for \$20.6 million of economic activity, which increases to \$41.7 million once indirect effects are considered. And much of this activity happens in spring and fall, when Colorado tourism is otherwise low.

The Winery at Holy Cross Abbey is one producer that clearly understands the significance of these economic impact statistics. Although Matt Cookson makes some of Colorado's best wine, he and his wife and business partner Sally (both wine industry veterans) know that the wine is not enough by itself to ensure a winery's ongoing success. They understand the importance of the complete wine experience.

Like most other wineries, they have an inviting tasting room but more important they have become vital members of their community. This is on full display at the



The West Elks AVA (Paonia, CO) Photo by: Cradurr Photography

annual Harvest Fest, a weekend of events that begins with a Winemaker's Dinner Friday night and continues with a festival on the winery grounds on Saturday and Sunday.

The Winemaker's Dinner was particularly special this year as it was held on the Royal Gorge Route Railroad and featured an eight-course meal paired with the Abbey's wines.

The festival on Saturday and Sunday surrounded the winery's tasting room with local purveyors offering food, arts and crafts, and entertainment. If Grand Junction seems too far to drive next year, make a point of visiting the Abbey winery instead.

These two weekends brought home to me an interesting fact about the Colorado wine industry: that most growers and wineries focus on the popular Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, probably because they are so well known. But several people told me during those two weekends that the most promising grapes may be ones such as Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Cabernet Franc, and Syrah.

I have long thought Riesling was one of the best grapes for Colorado and it is the second most grown white grape. And Syrah plantings are now third among the reds. As the industry has grown into its adolescence, as Caskey calls it, it seems the challenge for adulthood is to find its identity. Like Malbec in Argentina and Carmenère in Chile, I wonder if there will be a signature grape that emerges for Colorado, even as producers continue to improve quality across the board.

I know one thing for sure; it will be fun for us to find out.