

THE WINE GUY

Wine events highlight state's growing industry

The harvest season 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 places to do that are the Colorado Mountain Winefest, which celebrated its 15th anniversary in the Grand Junction/Palisade area Sept. 14 to 17, and the four-year-old Harvest Fest at the Winery at Holy Cross Abbey, which took place Sept. 22 to 24 in Cañon City.

Winefest was a four-day extravaganza of vineyard bike tours; seminars on wine and food pairing, grape growing and winemaking; winery tours; winemaker dinners at local restaurants and a wine-makers brunch. The showcase event was the Festival in the Park in Palisade, with 43 wineries and more than 50 artisans and gourmet-food producers. The event attracted about 7,000 people.

What a great way to display the improving quality of Colorado wines. Although I tasted several average wines and a few just plain bad wines, I also found an encouragingly wide range of good wines.

Winefest may be the most visible example of how the Colorado wine industry has matured in the past decade. The industry was virtually nonexistent before 1990. Today, it is the fastest growing agricultural segment in the state, according to the Colorado Wine Industry Development Board. The board's executive director, Doug Caskey, says the state has 64 wineries (and counting), compared with about half a dozen in 1990.

A Colorado State University study estimated the industry's contribution to Colorado's economy to be \$21.1 million in 2005; wine-based tourism accounted for \$41.7 million.



RICH MAURO
Gazette wine columnist

COLORADO WINE BY THE NUMBERS

- Production has increased an average of more than 20 percent during each of the past 14 years.

- About 12,500 cases were produced in fiscal year 1995 versus 91,000 cases in fiscal year 2006.

- An estimated 160 grape growers currently tend 850 acres, harvesting about 1,350 tons in 2005. That number will probably exceed 1,600 tons this year.

SOURCE: Colorado Wine Industry Development Board

producers continue to improve quality across the board. I know one thing for sure: it will be fun for us consumers to find out.

If you want to brush up on Colorado wines, try these, some of my favorites from the two events:

GRAND VALLEY WINERIES

- 2005 Two Rivers Riesling
- 2005 Grande River Viognier
- 2004 Garfield Estates Cabernet Franc
- 2003 Plum Creek Syrah
- NV Graystone Port II
- NV Whitewater Hill Cabernet Port "Crag Crest"

WEST ELKS WINERIES

- 2004 Alfred Eames Sangre del Sol
- 2003 Terror Creek Gewurztraminer

FRONT RANGE WINERIES

- NV Augustina's Wine Chick Red (shiraz)
- Trail Ridge Colorado

Winefest may be the most visible example of how the Colorado wine industry has matured in the past decade. The industry was virtually nonexistent before 1990. Today, it is the fastest growing agricultural segment in the state, according to the Colorado Wine Industry Development Board. The board's executive director, Doug Caskey, says the state has 64 wineries (and counting), compared with about half a dozen in 1990.

A Colorado State University study estimated the industry's contribution to Colorado's economy to be \$21.1 million in 2005; wine-based tourism accounted for \$41.7 million.

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

Like most wineries, they have an inviting tasting room with a wide variety of wine- and food-related items. But more important, they have become vital members of their community, as evidenced by Harvest Fest, a weekend that began with a Winemaker's Dinner and continued with a festival on the winery grounds.

The Winemaker's Dinner was extra special this year. It was held on the Royal Gorge Route Railroad, where an eight-course meal was paired with the Abbey's wines — and Matt Cookson's wit and wisdom.

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: 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 including riesling, gewürztraminer, cabernet franc and syrah.

I have long thought riesling was one of the best grapes for Colorado, because our climate

GRAND VALLEY WINERIES

- 2005 Two Rivers Riesling
- 2005 Grande River Viognier
- 2004 Garfield Estates Cabernet Franc
- 2003 Plum Creek Syrah
- NV Graystone Port II
- NV Whitewater Hill Cabernet Port "Crag Crest"

WEST ELKS WINERIES

- 2004 Alfred Eames Sangre del Sol
- 2003 Terror Creek Gewurztraminer

FRONT RANGE WINERIES

- NV Augustina's Wine Chick Red (shiraz)
- Trail Ridge Colorado

WINERY AT HOLY CROSS ABBEY

- 2003 Colorado Syrah
- 2004 Colorado Merlot Reserve
- 2005 American Riesling

Rich Mauro is a Denver-based wine columnist. Reach him at 636-0194 or write to him at The Gazette, P.O. Box 1779, Colorado Springs 80901.