

Wineries in the Texas Hill Country only getting better with age

Seven spots to check out during Texas Wine Month

Posted: 12:00 a.m. Thursday, Oct. 15, 2015

By Arianna Auber - American-Statesman Staff

Many Texas Hill Country winemakers agree that the state's sometimes scorching temperatures can actually produce a fine harvest of warm-weather grapes — but which type defines Texas as a wine destination in its own right? Is it Tempranillo? Tannat? Aglianico? Each winery swears by a particular varietal or two, and each one has figured out how to turn them into stellar wines that are starting to earn global buzz.

It's a great time to explore wineries — it is, after all, Texas Wine Month. With 46 wineries scattered along the Texas Wine Trail in the Hill Country, there is no shortage to choose from, but make sure to include these seven on your day trip travels. They're some of the best, with revolutionary ideas about how to take Texas wine to the next level and plenty of award-winning wines that can compete with France, California and other leading wine regions.



The bold tannins of estate-grown tannat grapes, among others, have helped to put Bending Branch Winery on the map as a ... [Read More](#)

Becker Vineyards

464 Becker Farms Road, Stonewall. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday-Saturday, noon to 6 p.m. Sunday. 830-644-2681, beckervineyards.com.

You heard it through the grapevine: No Texas wine guide is worth its salt without mention of Becker Vineyards, which helped pioneer Texas' start as a wine region in 1992 with owners Richard and Bunny Becker's first planting of grapes. Since their first vintages in 1995, they've been instrumental in making the industry into the respectable wine destination it is today.



William Chris Vineyards might be most known for its mourvedre, producing a lot of the red wine — but the winery ... [Read More](#)

The couple and their winemakers have been adventurous, putting their green thumbs to work growing all sorts of grapes, from viognier to syrah to cabernet sauvignon. Richard Becker seemed to recognize, even in the mid-1990s, that grapes from warmer Mediterranean regions would fare better here, even though the popularity of California wines — like cabernet — suggested following our Pacific coast neighbor's lead.

“If you make the world's best sauvignon blanc or the world's best viognier, people will come to find it,” he said in a 1996 American-Statesman article. That philosophy obviously works: Becker Vineyards produces upwards of 100,000 cases per year these days, and Becker wines have even been served at such sophisticated settings as the White House.

Wine down with: The Reserve Roussanne 2014. Texas wineries have been playing around with all sorts of obscure grapes lately, among them the white wine varietal of roussanne. It can be a tricky grape to grow; if done well, it'll make for a graceful treat like this Becker wine, with notes of citrus and honey on the palate.



+

JAY JANNER

Dave Reilly, winemaker at Duchman Family Winery, specializes in Italian varietals like montepulciano and aglianico and prefers to age them in ... [Read More](#)

Bending Branch Winery

142 Lindner Branch Trail, Comfort. 1 to 8 p.m. Thursday-Friday, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. 830-995-2948, bendingbranchwinery.com.

You heard it through the grapevine: Founders Robert Young and son-in-law John Rivenburgh opened

their winery on a historic piece of property in the old German town of Comfort, updating the 1840s-built cabin, barn and well house and surrounding acreage with structures made from the original bones. The desire to combine old and new in this way carries over into the wine program itself — with an underlying focus on sustainability.

- [Map: Wineries in the Texas Hill Country](#)

The duo relies on 160 open-top bins for red wine fermentation, an Old World method that produces more nuanced expressions in their wine than the more common tank fermentation. They also have a neat new toy that helps them pull out tannins and other desired compounds from their grapes: a flash détente machine. One of only four in the U.S., the machine applies extreme heat, a vacuum and flash cooling to macerate the skins of the grapes, enhancing their flavors and aromas in a way most current extraction methods can't. "It's very Willy Wonka-esque," Rivenburgh says.

Additionally, Bending Branch tries to be as eco-friendly as possible. The winery, which has a 22-acre estate vineyard, doesn't use any pesticides or insecticides, collects thousands of gallons of rainwater and even hatches beneficial insects in the spring. The ladybug and green lacewing colonies help with pest control; the praying mantises "are just for fun," Rivenburgh says, noting that he sometimes puts one on his shoulder while he works. "My kids think I have a pet," he jokes.

Wine down with: The 2012 Texas Tannat. This red grape from southwestern France is just one of the rarer varietals Bending Branch Winery prefers, but it's the winemakers' favorite. Try the 2012 vintage and you'll know why — it's full of black cherry and vanilla notes that lead into a bold, smoky finish.



Fall Creek Vineyards, the Hill Country's oldest winery, has been so successful in its 40 years that the owners, Ed and ... [Read More](#)

Duchman Family Winery

13308 RM 150 West, Driftwood. Noon to 6 p.m. Monday, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. 512-858-1470, duchmanwinery.com.

You heard it through the grapevine: When Duchman Family Winery winemakers Mark Penna and Dave Reilly — who took over the program a couple years before Penna died in 2011 — were approached with the then-unheard of mission of focusing on Texas-grown Italian varietals, they took on the challenge with gusto. They'd been swayed by Stan and Lisa Duchman, who started up the winery in 2004 after a love affair with the wine-heavy culture of Italy.

Penna, followed by Reilly, let the award-winning wines speak for themselves. Reilly now finds vermentino, montepulciano and aglianico and Duchman's other Mediterranean varietals to be the future of Texas wines, and general manager Jeff Ogle couldn't agree more. "Aglianico is the varietal with the most potential in Texas, although a lot of people say it's tempranillo," he says, noting that Reilly has helped to build likely the largest crop of aglianico outside of Italy.

Duchman's fierce focus on Italy carries over to the winery building itself, a stately stone-and-stucco structure mirroring a Tuscan villa. Its scenic, almost otherworldly design has made it the location of many Hill Country weddings. And it's also right next door to an Italian restaurant, Trattoria Lisina, for an easy wine-and-dine day trip.

Wine down with: The 2011 Aglianico. Ogle isn't exaggerating when he describes the wonders of this bold red. Take it home from the winery and pair it with a grilled steak dinner, marveling at its notes of stewed fruit and cinnamon and firm tannic structure.

Fall Creek Vineyards

1820 County Road 222, Tow. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Saturday, noon to 4 p.m. Sunday. 325-379-5361. 18059A RM 1826, Driftwood. 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday-Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. 512-858-4050. fcv.com.

You heard it through the grapevine: In the early 1970s, Ed and Susan Auler traveled to France in the hopes of crossing foreign cattle breeds with their Angus herd. That fateful trip, however, ended up converting them from ranchers with longtime roots in the Texas Hill Country to farmers who would go on to grow the region's first set of grapes to make wine.

They were the trailblazers: Fall Creek Vineyards became the Hill Country's very first winery. In 1990, Ed Auler put his old law degree to good use by getting the U.S. government to approve the Texas Hill Country American Viticultural Area (AVA) appellation. His work established the Central Texas area as a recognized region where other winemakers could follow in his and other early Texas vintners' footsteps. Now, with two locations, the Aulers' once small winery is celebrating 40 years.

That's no small feat. In that time, Susan Auler says she and her husband have gotten one main question

from naysayers: “Growing grapes in Texas? Oh, it’s too hot to do that.” Fall Creek’s director of winemaking, a Chilean with 20 years’ experience turning the fruit into good wine, came on in 2013 to disprove that notion with science. Sergio Cuadra is helping to bring Fall Creek onto the world stage, where he believes wines like the sauvignon blanc can hold their own next to their European and Californian counterparts — as well as make a statement about Texas terroir.

“We’ve got the right soil, the right climate, and we’ve got small wineries owned by families, not big corporations that don’t let their wines have personality,” Cuadra says. “Texas wine is in a good place.”

Wine down with: The 2014 Vintner’s Selection Series Chardonnay. Cuadra believes just about any grape has potential to thrive in the Hill Country, particularly old varietals with warm-weather roots. That’s certainly true of Fall Creek’s chardonnay, which balances a cool minerality with roasted nuttiness and rounds out with a luscious finish.

Pedernales Cellars

2916 Upper Albert Road, Stonewall. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday-Saturday, noon to 6 p.m. Sunday. 830-644-2037, pedernalescellars.com.

You heard it through the grapevine: Like many of Texas’ small winery operations, Pedernales Cellars has been a family affair from the beginning, when Larry and Jeanine Kuhlken planted their first vineyard in the early 1990s to help the state’s winemaking pioneers find their footing. The grapes would ripen into flavorful fruits and be shipped off — until the Kuhlken siblings, David and Julie, along with their spouses Heather Kuhlken and Fredrik Osterberg, decided they could make “world-class wines growing the right grapes for Texas’ climate and soil,” Osterberg says.

Just how much of a family affair is it? David is the winemaker, while his sister Julie is in charge of design and marketing. Fredrik, as president, handles the logistics of running a winery. And Heather has taken a lot of the photos for Pedernales’ website, luring people to the scenic site in Stonewall.

There, you’ll find a focus on warm-weather varietals, such as viognier and tempranillo, which the Pedernales Cellars founders are relieved to find wine lovers finally embracing. “Tempranillo is going to be the Texas grape in the way malbec has been for Argentina and cabernet has been for California,” Osterberg says.

Wine down with: The 2014 Texas Viognier. If you didn’t know better, you might think this floral white — rich with notes of honeysuckle and peach — originated in the northern Rhône Valley of France. It’s fragrant and fruity, and its lush body can hold up to all those holiday dinners ahead.

Spicewood Vineyards

1419 County Road 409, Spicewood. 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. 830-

693-5328, spicewoodvineyards.com.

You heard it through the grapevine: A study abroad trip to Spain in 1999 changed the course of Ron Yates' life. Instead of becoming a lawyer, he took the helm of this Hill Country winery several years later when the original owners decided they wanted to sell.

He had grown up with the Aulers of Fall Creek Vineyards — his dad was Ed Auler's first cousin — and had seen them run that winery without having any desire to join the industry, until all “the amazing, cheap tempranillos” he enjoyed in Spain got him thinking.

Once his family bought Spicewood in 2007, he was hooked. “It's one of those industries where if you get bitten by the bug, it's hard not to let it take over your body, your soul,” he says.

He had noticed that Spain's rolling hills, warm weather and few days of rain were an awful lot like the Hill Country, and he thought that Mediterranean varietals would do well in Texas. Now, the winery has 32 acres of estate vineyards — as well as two additional ones elsewhere in the Hill Country — that grow everything from his beloved tempranillo to the Bordeaux varieties the first owners had focused on, including sauvignon blanc and merlot. Sauvignon blanc remains one of Spicewood's top sellers.

Wine down with: Whatever tempranillo you can get your hands on. The 2012 High Plains Tempranillo — full of berries and black plum — is about to be joined by a 2013 tempranillo blend called the Good Guy, a boldly complex wine that you probably won't want to share.

William Chris Vineyards

10352 U.S. 290, Hye. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Wednesday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thursday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday-Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. Reservations required for the weekend. 830-998-7654, williamchriswines.com.

You heard it through the grapevine: If there's one winery in the Hill Country you should visit, Chris Brundrett says, it's his. As half of the namesake William Chris — the other is Bill Blackmon, one of his best friends and a longtime “winegrower” — he's proud of the welcoming vibe of the tasting room and the sprawling grounds beyond. Even the small town of Hye, where it's located — also the home of other beverages producers like Garrison Bros. Distillery — “has an energy, a feeling I can't explain,” Brundrett says.

“It doesn't matter if you've been trying wine for 10 minutes or 10 years,” he says. “We'll show you what real Texas wine is.”

William Chris Vineyards centers around the philosophy that wine is grown, not made, so both he and Blackmon put a big focus on the vineyards from which they get their grapes. Some are their own; others are in the Texas High Plains, where Blackmon will make between 25 to 30 trips each growing season to

watch the vines' progress. He's on the prowl even more in the mazes of vines closer to home, Brundrett says.

Wine down with: The 2013 Texas Mourvedre. William Chris produces varietals from all over France and Italy, but the one that's come to define the winery — and is prolifically produced — is the Rhône grape of mourvedre, which in this medium-bodied wine shows off notes of ripe berries, smoky sage and soft pepper.