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$13 billion boom: 5 reasons Texas wine is entering its best era yet

New wineries, incubators, award showings, and promising grape varieties are fueling a new era in Texas wine.

Reagan Sivadon is the winemaker at Sandy Road Vineyards in Johnson City, Texas.

By Tina Danze
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Despite pandemic challenges and an epic 2021 freeze, the Texas wine industry remains strong, with more than 500 wineries, 340 growers, and 5,140 acres devoted to grape-growing. It all adds up to Texas ranking fifth in the U.S. for wine production (behind California, Washington, New York and Oregon) — adding a $13.1 billion boost to the state's economy, according to a 2017 economic impact report from Wine America.

An increase in high quality wines has accompanied the growth of the Texas wine industry. Between the most recent San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition, San Francisco International Wine Competition, and TexSom International Wine Awards, Texas wines won more than 665 medals, including many Best of Class and Double Gold or Platinum awards. That's for just three of the many competitions.

Awards offer just a sliver of insight into the Texas wine scene — and some wineries skip competitions. Visiting winery tasting rooms is a great way to discover the breadth of Texas wines; many are available only at the wineries, where you can learn more about the wines and the grapes used to make them. In 2021, *Food and Wine Magazine* featured the Texas Hill Country in its story, "The Five Best Wine

Road Trips in the U.S.”

Related: Texas wine weekend: Triple N Ranch, one hour from Dallas, offers tastings, dinner, and scenery

Ron Yates is owner of Spicewood Vineyards and Ron Yates wineries in the Hill Country. (Mandy Levy)

Looking beyond the numbers, here are some promising developments on the Texas wine scene.

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New Texas wine labeling laws

In January 2022, new labeling laws for Texas wines went into effect, spelling good news for fans of terroir-focused wines. To be labeled with a Texas appellation, a wine must be made with at least 85% Texas fruit. Standards for more specific appellations are stricter. To be labeled with one of Texas' eight viticulture areas (AVAs), at least 85% of the wine's grapes must be grown in that AVA, and the remaining grapes must be grown in Texas. Wines stating a county appellation must source at least 75% of their grapes from within that county, with the remaining grapes sourced from Texas. To designate a single vineyard on the label, 95% of the grapes used in the wine must come from the stated vineyard, and the remaining 5% must be Texas-grown grapes.

What it means: "Overall, it's a great thing for the state, moving towards exclusivity of Texas fruit. If we want to be a wine region that's considered high-end — like established regions [such as] Napa, Sonoma, or the Central Coast — we need to use our own fruit," says Ron Yates, owner of Spicewood Vineyards and Ron Yates wineries. He says that his wineries have long abided by the new rules for their wines made with estate-grown grapes, but haven't always designated the vineyard on the

label.

With the new standards, it will be easy to identify wines that reflect a certain Texas terroir — a sense of place that you can taste. Texas is a big state, and each of the eight designated AVAs covers a lot of ground; within these AVA's the diversity of microclimates and soil variety can yield different nuances in grape expression.

Greg and Nikhila Narra Davis developed Kalasi Cellars through the Kerrville Hills Winery incubator program. (Stacy Lorraine)

Incubators launch a new winery generation

When Texas winemaking guru John Rivenburgh bought Kerrville Hills Winery, he made it an incubator, to help start-ups learn winemaking and launch their first wines. It was a logical step for Rivenburgh, who had a successful winemaking and vineyard consulting business since leaving Bending Branch Winery in 2015.

Rivenburgh's consulting work for 1850 Winery included an incubator plan, which came to fruition under new ownership as Slate Mill Wine Collective. (Members of the Slate Mill Collective now include Tatum Cellars, Wine for the People, C.L. Butaud, and 1850 Winery).

Unlike a custom crush facility, the Kerrville Hills Winery incubator promotes hands-on immersion in winemaking — with guidance from staff — and collaboration with other winemakers. "It's a true artists' co-op, where you can [start a winery] less expensively. It's the Amish barn-raising of winemaking," he says.

Whereas the prior generation of Texas wineries skewed toward affluent, older owners who could afford to build a winery right away, Kerrville Hills mentors mostly younger winemakers who lack the capital to invest on the front end.

"Currently there are 11 wineries and vineyards we are working with," Rivenburgh says, including Ab Astris Winery, Antima Cellars, and Siboney Cellars, which graduates to its own production facility with the 2022 harvest. Alums of the collective that now produce at their own wineries include Fly Gap Winery, Kalasi Cellars and Texas Heritage Vineyard.

Rivenburgh encourages his mostly female staff to pursue their winemaking projects on site too. His own wines have been well received, including the Kerrville Hills Semillon, which won a platinum medal at the 2021 TexSom International Wine Awards.

Tempranillo grapes at the Eden Hill Vineyards in Celina, Texas in 2017. (Tailyr Irvine / Staff Photographer)

All about the grapes

More than 50 grape varieties are currently grown in Texas. “I’m a big proponent of saying ‘diversity’ is our grape in Texas. We can grow anything here, because we have enough macro and micro climate diversity — you just have to find the right place to plant,” says Rivenburgh, who’s also a board member and past president of Texas Hill Country Wineries. “People used to say we couldn’t grow cab and merlot here, but we have some great cab and merlot clones.”

Sergio Cuadra, director of winemaking at Fall Creek Vineyards, agrees. “If we are in

the business of making high quality cabernet, we just have to find the best small lots to grow them," he says. He points out that Burgundy's prestigious Grand Cru vineyards comprise just 5% of the region's growing area.

Vineyard management is also key to growing grapes like cabernet sauvignon in the Texas heat, Cuadra says. To ensure the best fruit, he spends most of his time monitoring the vineyard, irrigating in precise amounts at specific times to mirror conditions for the best vintages of storied growing regions.

Texas winemakers also continue to experiment with new grapes — nevermind that they are less familiar to consumers.

"Everybody is experimenting. I love the fact that you can drive down [Highway] 290 and taste 35 grape varieties; you can't do that in Napa — cab is what you get," Yates says.

The new crop of Texas grapes includes Portuguese varieties like Touriga Nacional, Souzao, and Alicante Bouschet. They're suited to Texas, given the similarities between the growing regions of Southern Portugal and the Texas regions where tempranillo was an early success. Lesser known Spanish, French and Italian varieties are joining others with a good track record here.

Texas bubbly options expand, with frizzante and pet-nat wines

Some fun, fizzy wines are catching on with Texas winemakers. Pet-Nat wines (short for the French petillant naturel, meaning naturally sparkling) are made by completing fermentation in the bottle, to naturally produce bubbles. Pet-Nats are joined by frizzantes (lightly sparkling wines made with carbonation) in the new wave of Texas fizzy wines. Wineries like Bending Branch, Pedernales Cellars and Wine for the People are bringing bubbles to grenache, rosé and more.

Related: Legendary Texas winemaker Kim McPherson partners with brother on new winery near Fredericksburg

Sandy Road Vineyards in Johnson City, Texas, offers wine tastings in a tree house. (Bryan Chagoly)

A Hill Country expansion: New wineries and more

Wineries have long touted live music, charcuterie and sweeping views. Now they offer even more experiences. Here are some of the latest:

Sandy Roads Vineyard in Johnson City offers private "treehouse tastings" of wine and charcuterie on a treehouse deck overlooking the vineyard. Another private

outdoor tasting option is in the vineyard, seated in a pavilion. sandyroadvineyards.com.

Siboney Cellars in Johnson City offers daytime tastings, plus twilight tastings on Thursdays; guests sip wine under the twinkly-lit oak trees while a beautiful sunset gives way to a starlit sky. During Johnson City's holiday Lights Spectacular Weekend, the winery's outdoor Firelight Tastings take place around a fire. siboneycellars.com.

Slate Theory in Fredericksburg recently unveiled a dazzling, contemporary winery that includes a sprawling, underground barrel cellar with private tasting rooms and event space. Cellar tastings start at $45 and include a tour. The winery and vineyard are on the former Torre de Pietra estate. slatetheory.com.

The Edge is a new Fredricksburg tasting room, restaurant, and event space for English Newsom Cellars, a Lubbock winery known for its Texas High Plains wines. The 10,000-square-foot facility overlooks the Pedernales River, and is part of the massive Resort at Fredericksburg. Lodging includes eight charming tiny houses (100 more are planned). A conference center and event space accommodates large groups for celebrations. theresortatfredericksburg.com/drink-the-edge.

Carter Creek Winery Resort and Spa, located between Fredericksburg and Johnson City, has a tasting room, brewery, restaurant, event space, and two- to four-bedroom villa accommodations. Carter Creek's wines are made by veteran California winemaker Jon McPherson at McPherson Cellars, which is owned by his brother, Kim McPherson. cartercreek.com.

Arch Ray RV Resort in Fredericksburg is part of Fiesta Winery's resort development, which includes Ogle Brewery, Paul Bee Distillery, and the soon-to-come Arch Ray Winery. archrayresort.com/copy-of-arch-ray-winery.

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