

New Mexico JOURNEY

Fine Vines

New Mexico enjoys a long wine-making history and a growing list of award-winning wines

By Steve Winston

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Wines produced at Casa Rondeña (above) exemplify the state's robust industry.

The year was 1629 and Father Garcia de Zúñiga was tired of waiting for his shipments of sacramental wine. Traveling from Spain to his home in Colonial New Mexico, the wine could take up to a year to arrive. So the Franciscan monk decided to plant his own grapevines on the banks of the Rio Grande, just south of Socorro. When they blossomed, New Mexico became the first wine-producing region in what is now the U.S.—140 years before California.

Wine lovers may not at first associate New Mexico with great wine-making. After all, growing conditions here are far from ideal: Winters can be harsh, rain is scarce, and strong springtime winds can destroy vines. But despite such challenges, more than 35 wineries from south of Taos to north of El Paso together produce nearly 700,000 gallons each year, making New Mexico the 16th-largest wine-producing state in the nation.

"People who try our wines for the first time are always surprised by the quality," says Olivia DeCamp, executive director of the New Mexico Wine Growers Association (NMWGA). Indeed, a number of New Mexico wines regularly win awards at prestigious competitions. "New Mexicans are discovering they don't have to leave the state to enjoy first-class wines," DeCamp says.

But it was a long road from the time Father Zúñiga planted those first grapevines. In the years that followed, wine production was an up-and-down proposition. At one high point, in 1885, New Mexico was producing nearly a million gallons a year. Then one setback after another hit—horrible flooding of the Rio Grande, drought, Prohibition—and production stayed low for the next five decades.

In the 1970s, things started to turn around again. Clarence Cooper, a physics professor at UTEP, planted grapevines in a field next to his home in the tiny village of Chamberino. To his pleasant surprise, they blossomed—in the middle of sagebrush country. Four years later, he opened La Viña Winery in La Union, 10 miles north of El Paso. The success of La Viña—New Mexico's oldest operating winery—helped reawaken interest in the local wine industry, and soon a new wave of wineries began to appear on the landscape.

Not surprisingly, European wine companies began to see the potential for New Mexico to produce excellent wines and started buying land. Several of them also looked at California, but found New Mexico to be a more affordable investment.

Gilbert Gruet was one such pioneer. A champagne-maker in France, he sent his son and his youngest daughter to New Mexico in 1982 to establish a winery. Today, Gruet Winery in Albuquerque specializes in sparkling wines and has won honors at the prestigious Southwest Wine Competition. "It's been hard work. But now we sell 130,000 cases a year in 49 states, as well as in places like Japan, Denmark, and Canada," says Sofian Himeur, Gruet's grandson, who does marketing for the winery.

Around the same time, a group of Swiss investors purchased part of a vineyard in Deming and brought over Paolo D'Andrea, a young Italian winemaker who came from four generations of wine growers, to run the operation "for a year." That was 24 years ago, and D'Andrea is still in Deming. He and his wife, Sylvia, now own the property, Luna Rossa Winery. Their wines

have won 16 awards, no doubt due to D'Andrea's talent and temerity. "It's a challenge to grow wine here," he says. "But we've adapted. The cooler temperatures at night really help. So does the underground drip-irrigation system we use."

Jesse Padberg, who co-owns Vivac Winery, located 25 miles south of Taos, considers the difficult growing conditions a plus. "The terrain and weather can be stressful for grapes here," he says. "But it turns out this is actually a good thing: The grapes are hardier because they've 'learned' to adapt. And their flavors are stronger."

The NMWGA is in the process of creating wine trails in four distinct regions—North, Central, South, and Mesilla/Mimbres (Southwest/ South-Central). Each region has unique characteristics that allow certain types of grapes to flourish. Rieslings and pinot noirs, for instance, do especially well in the north, where there's a higher elevation, longer winters, earlier frosts, and day-night temperature swings of up to 40 degrees. Dolcettos, tempranillos, and cabernets do better in the south, where there's less rain, good drainage, and less drastic temperature fluctuations.

When winemakers are not busy harvesting grapes, they can often be found in their tasting rooms, happy to discuss their vintages with visitors. Some tasting rooms alone are worth the trip. John Calvin, owner of Casa Rondeña in Albuquerque, for example, designed his property with Mediterranean influences. The adobe tasting room has a stone-tile floor, a limestone bar, carved wooden doors, Moorish archways, and traditional New Mexican furniture. But the winery isn't all show: *Saveur* magazine named Calvin's 2005 Meritage Red (a blend of three reds) No. 10 out of 205 in the country.

More and more wineries here are snapping up prestigious awards, which is good news for New Mexicans who like to drink local wines. "The future of New Mexico wines looks bright," DeCamp says. "We have the climate. We have the soil. We have the expertise. And we're spreading the word."

Steve Winston's articles have appeared in the New York Times, Travel & Leisure, and Men's Health.



La Viña Winery owners Denisa and Ken Stark sample some of their craft at their La Union winery.

If You Go

[New Mexico Wine Growers Association](#) has a list of wineries by region. Sample wines, talk with winemakers, and enjoy good food and music at local festivals.

Albuquerque

The [Albuquerque Wine Festival](#). Held on Memorial Day at the Balloon Fiesta grounds.

Bernalillo

The [New Mexico Wine Festival](#) at Bernalillo. Held Labor Day weekend.

La Union

[La Viña Winery](#) hosts a Harvest Festival in October and a Blues & Jazz Festival in April (this year held April 24–25).

Las Cruces

The [Southern New Mexico Wine Festival](#). Held Memorial Day weekend.

Santa Fe

The [Santa Fe Wine Festival](#). Held July 3–4 at El Rancho de las Golondrinas.

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