

Wine Connoisseur

Bobby Lee Lawrence



Wines of New Mexico

By Bobby Lee Lawrence

What makes New Mexico wines so appealing to certain consumers and wine lovers? Some say it's the fact that they are mostly produced in small quantities, putting them in the category of "boutique" wines. The description of a "boutique" winery varies, depending on whom you ask. My description of a boutique winery (one that is shared by most winemakers) is a winery that produces less than 5,000 cases of wine annually, and whether or not the wines are widely distributed. Many New Mexico wineries distribute only within the state, but will ship certain wines to other states, where the local laws permit. Currently, there are approximately thirty-one wineries in New Mexico. A small handful, such as Gruet in Albuquerque, have national distribution.

Boutique wineries have a certain advantage. Their winemakers usually have a preference for a certain grape variety or a specific blend of grapes, resulting in wine that falls into the "handmade" quality category. These winemakers are a passionate bunch and can produce wines that are slightly "different". As a consumer, you need to find out if that difference is something you will enjoy. When you find a wine that appeals to your taste, spend some time discussing it with the winemaker to learn the reason that he or she is driven to make that particular style of wine. The experience can be very rewarding and you will become trusting of what that winery is producing. Keep in mind that these wines will cost a little more. Another excellent source of exploring boutique wines is your local wine shop.

New Mexico is the oldest wine-producing region in the United States. Like other wine growing regions, such as California, early Spanish settlers brought vines to our area from Europe, finding the climate and the Rio Grande Valley ideal for growing grapes. Many vineyards mainly produced sacramental wines, and by the late 1800s, over 900,000 barrels were being produced here. For a period of time (as was the case with many wine producers in the United States), disease, severe weather, and Prohibition proved to be the New Mexico wine area's undoing. It wasn't until the 1980s that New Mexico's wine industry came alive again and is now heralded as one of six emerging wine producing areas to watch.

Today, the New Mexico Wine Growers Association, a non-profit organization, works with many of the wineries in New Mexico to promote locally grown and handcrafted wines. Most of the wineries are small to medium. The state is broken down into three areas: Northern, Central, and Southern. As you would expect, the wines reflect the different climates in which the grapes are grown. Grapes need a balanced climate; warm days and cool nights are preferred. If too much of

either is experienced, the results can be disastrous.

Living in New Mexico, we are very aware of how the climate differs from Taos to Las Cruces. In the Southern region, for example, we find wineries such as St. Clair, Mademoiselle de Santa Fe, La Vina and Tularosa vineyards. They tend to produce wines that are the result of hot climate conditions, such as Pecan Delight Sparkling wine or Muscat by Mademoiselle Winery. St. Clair Winery in Deming, for example, produces a good merlot from grapes grown at the Las Lunas vineyard in Deming. Many of the Southern New Mexico wineries source their grapes for Pinots or Cabernets from northern New Mexico, or from growers that have vineyards in higher altitudes.

Northern and Central New Mexico are blessed with more temperate climates. Grape vines flower when the daytime temperature reaches 63 to 68 degrees. They hit their stride when the temperature hits the mid-80s. Many parts of New Mexico, like other grape growing areas throughout the world, are ideal for producing excellent wines. Again, areas with predictable and consistent climates are the ones that year after year will produce top wines. Most winemakers take this into consideration when deciding what type of grapes to plant.

Many medal-winning wines have been produced in New Mexico. Some of the most notable are coming from wineries such as Gruet in Albuquerque and La Chiripada in Dixon. Gruet specializes in sparkling wines and has won many medals. La Chiripada won gold medals for their Cabernet Sauvignon NV Reserve, and was awarded a silver medal for their 2003 Chardonnay at the New York Finger Lakes Competition. As more and more wines are entered into competition, both nationally and internationally, the wines of New Mexico will gain notoriety.



The influence of winemakers from different countries and states immigrating to New Mexico has helped produce quality wines. Whether you prefer sweet, light wines or the more bold reds, you can find them in our glorious state. It won't be long before New Mexico will be recognized as more than an emerging power in the winemaking industry; it will soon be a leader.

Great wines need to be aged. Great wineries need to be visited.



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