

The Vintners and their Wine **By Dennis Powers**

Oregon has consistently ranked within the top four wine-producing states behind California, Washington, and New York. One of the interesting developments has been that of Southern Oregon's vintners and its distinct valleys. Although Southern Oregon has the warmest growing condition in Oregon, it receives considerably less rainfall than the northern wine-growing regions (i.e., 40 % less than the Willamette Valley). The different climates found in these valleys, however, allow both cool- and warm-weather varieties to be grown.

The Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms designates regions as American Viticultural Areas ("AVA"), and this allows those defined geographic areas to label their wines as produced from that region. The Applegate Valley is AVA-designated, although part of Rogue Valley's AVA. Both are included within the Southern Oregon AVA that also brings in the Umpqua Valley. This means that Applegate and Rogue River wineries can label their grapes and wines from there, just as Napa Valley does.

The Rogue Valley AVA includes the Rogue River and several tributaries, including the rivers and valleys of Bear Creek Valley, Applegate Valley, and the Illinois Valley--and these roughly define its boundaries. Most wineries are found along one of these three tributaries, but not the Rogue River.

These three valleys differ greatly in territory and climate; for example, Bear Creek Valley to the east is the warmest and driest, and the Illinois River valley to the west is the coolest and wettest. Each river valley has a unique climate and grows different varieties of grapes, but this overall region is the warmest and driest of Oregon's wine-growing regions.

The Bear Creek Valley runs parallel with the I-5 corridor, and its climate is deemed similar to the Bordeaux region of France; thus grape varieties such as Merlot, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Gris, Syrah, and Sauvignon Blanc are grown. The Applegate Valley (east of Bear Creek Valley and south of Grants Pass) follows the Applegate River, and it is generally drier and warmer than the Illinois Valley, but not as warm and dry as the Bear Creek Valley. Varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Merlot, Syrah, and Chardonnay--but depending on the location--can be developed.

To the west of the Applegate, the Illinois Valley is the furthest of the three valleys from principal population areas. This valley follows the Illinois River's path (and its tributaries through the Cave Junction area) and shapes its way through the forested mountains of the Siskiyou to the south and Klamath to the west.

Coming to the Rogue Valley in 1852, the pioneer photographer Peter Britt two years later planted the first vineyard in the Rogue Valley with Mission grapes from California that he purchased from an Italian peddler. Britt acquired over time more property and began experimenting with different grapes and fruit trees. He developed a twenty-acre commercial orchard and expansive grape vineyards on a ranch that was one mile outside of Jacksonville.

Having named his business as the “Valley View Winery,” he had experimented by the 1870s with over 200 varieties under his vineyard label to determine their suitability with the Rogue Valley’s conditions. Conducted first in his basement, the winery is believed to be the first established in Oregon.

By the 1880s, Peter Britt had planted numerous varieties, including Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Riesling, Malbec, Petite Sirah, Semillon, Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Traminer and Franc Pinot. Now named Pinot Noir, the Franc Pinot may have been the first planting of this grape in Oregon. More than a dozen grape growers were reported in 1890 in the Jacksonville area (including Ashland and Phoenix) with over 100 acres planted. Upon the death of Peter Britt in 1905, the Valley View Winery ended its production, but sold out its inventory over the following two years.

Pioneers reportedly from the Illinois Valley to the Applegate and Bear Creek planted grapes, but the advent of pears, apples, and peaches, along with the early 1900’s Orchard Boom overshadowed everything else. Prohibition, moreover, started four years earlier in Oregon under state law in 1916, which shut the industry down entirely. The 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920 created national prohibition and the entire country was now prohibited from producing, selling, or consuming alcoholic beverages (which included, of course, wine).

Although the 21st Amendment in 1933 ended national prohibition, the depression, World War II, and other industries as timber and farming put a crimp on any further development of vineyards and wineries. It would be forty-five years before a winery in the Rogue Valley would become bonded.

The planting of vineyards finally started up in the 1970s as people looked for different ways of earning a living by selling the grapes to wineries outside the area. Valley View Winery (the Applegate Valley) and Siskiyou Winery (the Illinois Valley) in 1978 became the first wineries in the Rogue Valley to become bonded in modern times. A winery needs such a bond in order to operate and sell publicly.

Bridgeview and Foris wineries started up production in the Illinois Valley in 1986, and Bridgeview eventually became one of Oregon’s largest producers. Two years later, Ashland Vineyards and Weisinger’s Winery opened in Ashland. In 1997, Californians Lee and Margaret Traynham purchased Del Rio Orchards outside Gold Hill with Jolee and Rob Wallace as the managing partners; they re-planted two hundred acres to become the largest vineyard in the Rogue Valley.

Wineries and vineyards also sprouted up in the Applegate Valley to where it was designated an AVA back in 2000. One of this state’s first wineries started here when Alfred H. Carson purchased a ranch in 1876 and planted a vineyard of table grapes destined for the Portland market. Reaching thirty acres in size, it became the then largest in the region--but later closed. The decades later reopening of the vineyard in the Applegate as Valley View Winery continued its operating history.

The Southern Oregon region has grown considerably, not only in its development but also as to its vintners and their wine. For example, the acreage in grapes from 1995 to 2008 greatly increased in Jackson County (295 acres to 1394) and Josephine (311 to 609 acres), and the number of Rogue Valley wineries jumped from 9 to then 42 in that period. Although owing to the effects of the later great recession, the increases since then have not been as substantial, this growth is anticipated to begin again as economic conditions change accordingly. The appeal is certainly there.

Regardless of the varietal valley, the interest in converting rural acreage or farmland into vineyards continues on. Very much like the Orchard Boom of the early 1990s, real estate agents look to sell undeveloped land to “gentleman farmers” and especially those from California, owing to Oregon’s state tax breaks and the lower acreage cost. Vineyards and wineries now dot the region--and this is a far cry from when Peter Britt created the first vineyard well over 150 years ago.

Sources: Dr. Willard Brown, “Rogue Valley Winegrowers Association: Vineyards of the Rogue Valley/History Timeline,” August 2009, at [The Rogue Valley Vineyards](#); “Peter Britt: The Horticulturist,” at [Peter Britt](#); “Wines Northwest: Rogue Valley and Applegate Valley,” at [The Three Valleys](#); “Oregon Wine: Southern Oregon,” at [Southern Oregon](#); Greg Stiles, “Southern Oregon Wines Barrel Ahead,” *Mail Tribune*, December 13, 2012, at [Modern Times Production](#); Cleve Twitchell, “Applegate Valley now a Viticultural area,” *Mail Tribune*, December 22, 2000, at [The Applegate Valley](#); Janet Eastman, “Californians find vineyards intoxicating,” *Mail Tribune*, July 8, 2013, at [Today's Vineyard Interest](#).