

Winemaking enjoys a comeback in county

By Elena Gaona

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

June 25, 2006

WARNER SPRINGS – Winemaker Alex McGeary drives to the gate and stops.

Stretching beyond the locked gate are neat rows of cabernet, merlot and syrah grapevines. They make up one of the county's youngest vineyards, La Serenissima, which McGeary manages. Within the tender leaves climbing the stakes in this rocky, mountainous terrain, he envisions the promise of great winemaking in San Diego County.

“This is the future,” McGeary says, waving his arm across the 20-acre vineyard. “There are a lot of people who want to be in the wine business in San Diego. They call me, they hang around, they ask questions. They come back and ask me some more questions.”

McGeary owns Shadow Mountain Vineyards and Winery in Warner Springs. He is also president of the San Diego County Vintners Association, which represents about half of the wineries in the county.

Yes, there are wineries in San Diego County, McGeary often tells people. And no, he doesn't mean Temecula.

The biggest buzz these days is that there are at least 24 commercial wineries in the county. They are tucked in everywhere from the cool mountains of Warner Springs to the warm shores of Pacific Beach, and many more operations are on the way.

“It's a renaissance of winemaking,” McGeary says. “We're returning to our roots.”

With a range of climates, primarily sunny inland areas still influenced by the ocean, North County was dotted by wineries and vineyards from Spanish Colonial days until Prohibition reduced the number to two. After Prohibition, winemakers tried to cash in and some 20 wineries were created, McGeary says. But development, the cost of land and a glut of wine forced most of them to close. By 1999, six wineries remained.

Nowadays, ask any winemaker and he or she will rattle off the names of new wineries just months old or being planned. At least a handful of new ones are in the pipeline just in Ramona, says Bill Schweitzer, president of the Ramona Valley Vineyard Association. In January, the area was named the region's second American Viticultural Area, a federal designation also assigned to the San Pasqual Valley. With at least six wineries, Ramona boasts the greatest concentration of wineries in the county, though only two have tasting rooms open to the public.

“I call us microboutiques. Gallo spills more in a day than we make in a year,” says winemaker Victor Edwards, who operates Edwards Vineyards and Cellars in



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune
Winemaker Jim Jenkins, 67, pruned four-year-old pinot noir vines last month. He started J. Jenkins Winery in Julian with his wife, Jeanne, about four years ago.

Ramona. “But I’ve made some rather nice wines. Now we’ve just got to get people to accept Ramona can actually make wine.”

It’s not easy to open, operate and make a winery profitable. Insiders say it takes at least \$25,000 for even a small operation. The permitting process is long. And once that is completed, educating customers about where to go is the next important step.

Besides the perception that there is no wine industry in the county – even though wineries, including Orfila, Bernardo, Fallbrook, Ferrara and Menghini, have been operating for many years – local wineries are often far apart. They are not clustered near one road as in Temecula, and they are not big enough yet to organize wine tours and produce maps that draw visitors to Napa, Sonoma or Santa Barbara vineyards. Instead, visitors have to drive around to find them.

This lack of easy access, plus the fact not all the wineries offer tasting rooms, likely will keep San Diego County’s wine industry small and local, McGeary says. On the other hand, remote and distinctive wineries go hand-in-hand with the county’s tourism industry, he says, and offer more unusual destinations. The vintners association now qualifies for county tourism dollars, which it used last year to create its Web site: www.sandiegowineries.org.



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune
Jim Jenkins swirled a 2004 pinot noir fresh from a barrel and checked out its color.

For those willing to discover it, McGeary says, the county’s winemaking industry offers some of the best variety in the world because of dozens of microclimates, resulting in merlot in Escondido and cabernet sauvignon in Ramona to chardonnay in Pacific Beach made with Baja California grapes.

Why a resurgence in winemaking now? Many of the county’s newest winemakers are adults switching careers, in search of a “wine lifestyle,” they say. For example, former San Diego Fire Chief Jeff Bowman and his wife, Denise, are starting a small winery on their 2½-acre property in Escondido.

The new winemakers say the county is helping them in their new ventures.

Jim Jenkins, 67, a retired pediatrician, says he is so content he almost hears angels sing when he sips his 2005 estate sauvignon blanc. Jenkins got into the business about four years ago by starting J. Jenkins Winery in Julian with his wife, Jeanne.

He says changes to county zoning laws five years ago are spurring the wine movement. The changes make it easier for “mom and pop” wineries to open by requiring fewer permits to establish small wholesale wineries in agricultural areas. Applicants also are allowed to import grapes. However, many of the new wineries are not automatically allowed to have tasting rooms, which require a special permit.

J. Jenkins Winery, which expects to produce 800 cases of wine this year, is one of the few newer operations permitted to have a tasting room, where most of its wine is sold. Visitors can sip outside, facing Volcan Mountain and the blooming apple trees that still cover a hill from a previous agricultural operation.

In Ramona, Herman and Rose Salerno offer no tasting room at Salerno Winery – yet. But their signature petite sirah, which is sold wholesale and available at local markets, has won gold medals at the Florida and San Diego international competitions.

“We grow the grapes here,” Rose Salerno says proudly.

Grape growing also is increasing in the county, local wine industry insiders say. The industry is so young now that most winemakers know each other and still generally help each other instead of being rivals. They often

share tips about new vineyards producing good local grapes, one of the hardest commodities to come by, though more vines are being planted throughout North County.

The latest crop report by the county's agriculture department shows grape growing in the county is still relatively small – about 300 acres producing about 540 tons of grapes annually. That crop was valued at \$378,000 in 2004, up from \$240,274 the year before.

Accountants Mike and Nancy Dunlap got into the grape-growing business in Escondido on a lark. As amateur winemakers, they met someone who suggested planting vineyards would be just as pretty, but not as expensive, as landscaping.

They've grown as much as 18,500 pounds of merlot and zinfandel grapes that they crush to make their private-label wine, Escondido Sunrise Vineyard, or sell to wineries and home winemakers.

“We sell out,” Nancy Dunlap says, adding their neighbor just planted grapes, too, in hilly Escondido where the days are sunny and the nights are cool.

“It's a natural comeback,” she says. “It's a good area to grow grapes.”

John Alongé says he opened the San Diego Wine and Culinary Center in downtown San Diego nearly a year ago when he noticed the number of new wineries appearing and the country's growing love affair with wine. His wine bar features varietals from apple wine from Julian to sangiovese from the San Pasqual Valley and viognier from Warner Springs. Anything local sells, he says.

“It's happening, but it's under the radar,” Alongé says, adding that he knows of six wineries expected to open soon. “They're small, spread out, discreet. It makes it more interesting, like a great adventure. Is everything good? No. But you have a whole range that's very exciting, and a lot of them are very, very, good.”

■Elena Gaona: (760) 737-7575; elena.gaona@uniontrib.com

Find this article at:

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/northcounty/20060625-9999-2m25winery.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.