



Grape Growing in Texas

by Christine Millar, HCMG

Texas is the oldest grape growing state and has the third highest grape industry for wines in the U.S. Prohibition shut down the older wineries that had been in operation since the Spaniards brought grape vines to the New World. Val Verde Winery in Del Rio is the only pre-Prohibition winery in existence now and survived those tough times by producing sacramental wine for the Catholic Church.

Texas was also the home of Dr. Munson, the man who saved the European wine industry from extinction back in the 1800s. Grape varieties native to the Americas were imported into Europe to see if they could make suitable wine. A tiny yellow-orange aphid which mutually coexists with native American grape vines in the roots were unwittingly brought in as well and was responsible for the insect plague in Europe known as phylloxera. The aphid spread quickly throughout all of Europe, killing off susceptible European grape vines by attacking the roots. Peasant farmers who relied on the sale of grapes from their small vineyards for part of their income were the first to lose their land. Some of the larger vineyards were able to weather the disaster.

Dr. Munson was instrumental in selecting suitable American rootstocks, resistant to the aphid, onto which susceptible, traditional wine grapes could be grafted. Thus the devastated vineyards in Europe could be replanted. The book "The Botanist and the Vintner - How Wine Was Saved for the World" by Christy Campbell recounts this fascinating story and is well worth reading. It has taken decades to get European wine production back up.

Today, the only European grape vines being grown on their own rootstocks are found in South America where the aphid is not present. There is still much speculation today among European winemakers whether there is a difference in the taste of wine from grafted grapes or those vines growing on their own rootstock. Large European wine companies are expanding their operations and planting vineyards in Chile and Argentina. Today we enjoy an abundance of good wines grown from all over the world. Now, with a global glut of wine grapes, the European Community is considering pulling up a percentage of grape vines to support their pricing structure as wines made in countries like the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, Argentina and Chile, to name a few, have successfully competed in the global wine market.

Wine grape growing is strictly regulated in Europe. Only certain varieties can be planted in some prime areas. Irrigation is historically not allowed. The grapes are expected to manage on available rainfall. European growers feel that better wines are produced when the vines undergo some stress. However, Europe has more rainfall and is generally not as hot as certain parts of Texas.

There is a large body of amassed local knowledge in grape growing throughout Europe that has been passed down over the centuries. Texas growers often have to experiment and tweak official guidelines that advocate European practices. These European guidelines may not be suitable for the local conditions with the result that the vines do poorly, requiring tremendous amounts of pesticides and fungicides, and finally die anyway. Prohibition destroyed our base of local growers and their knowledge. Grape growing practices in Greece and the Mideast, such as Lebanon, may be of value in Texas. These countries do produce good wines but they are not seen much in the marketplace.

A small local grower that I talked with has had more success the second time around by planting the vines farther apart than recommended and deep watering once a week rather than continuous drip irrigation. They are trying a more organic approach to fungus and pests by experimenting with a mixture of cornmeal, greensand, compost, sulfur and Epsom salts. Every week during the growing seas, each plant gets dusted with a half cup of this mixture. The excess powder is shaken off the leaves and falls to the ground. It remains to be seen whether there will be fewer problems, but the vines are far healthier now.

The leaf canopy must be carefully managed in semi-arid regions. During a drought excess leaves are removed to stop water loss, however, enough must be left to shield the developing grapes from sunburn. "The grapes may see the sun but the sun should never see the grapes" is an old European axiom, which is true of tomatoes as well. The grapes grown in semi-arid climates are more concentrated and the wines generally can be expected to have a higher alcohol content.

A grape vine takes two to three years to come into commercial production. Well-cared-for vineyards can produce for up to 60 years, after which the vines are usually uprooted and burned and the vineyard replanted with new stock. Newer varieties are continually being introduced to improve production and quality. The harvest in Texas starts at the end of July and August whilst in Europe the harvest is in late September and October.

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Wine grape varieties that do well locally are cabernet, zinfandel and Muscat canelli, although there are many other varieties planted in Texas. It is a local opinion that of all the varieties planted, tempranillo, syrah (or shiraz), viognier, Muscat blanc and Muscat canelli are certainly the best suited varieties for Texas. Genache (also known as Garnacha), Sangiovese and Barbera grapes are other hot climate grapes which deserve to be more widely planted here as well. The other varieties are better known but require much more care to make suitable wines. The best wine grapes at present are grown in the Texas Panhandle.

Texas Wine Grapes, Red Varieties:

Malbec - complex, tannin-laden red with lush flavors of plums, berries and spice...good with beef, turkey and hearty stews. **(Region 1)**

Tempranillo - lush, smoky red with a hint of vanilla and rich, dark fruit. Sometimes you will taste leather and occasionally tobacco. Good with pizza, cabrito and tamales. **(Region 3)**

Syrah - smoky red with soft tannins, toasted oak, berries and plums. Good with beef steak, grilled meats, pizza and wild game. **(Region 3)**

Sangiovese - smooth-textured red spiced with wild raspberries and licorice. Good with beef, pork, pasta and cheese. **(Region 3 and Region 6)**

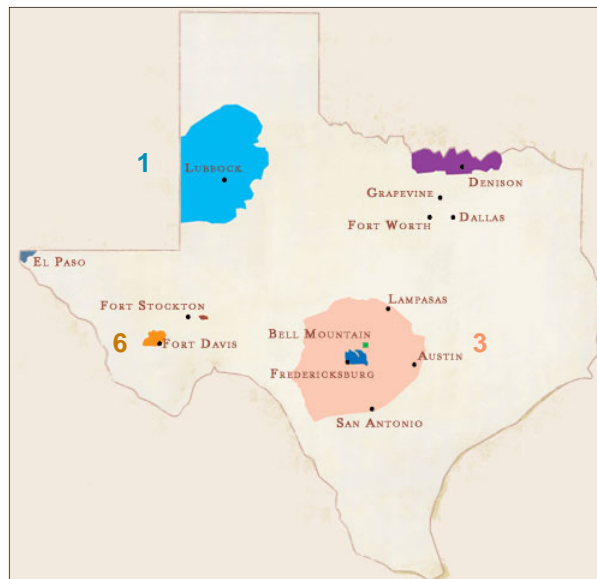
Zinfandel - full bodied, bold and fruity bursting with berries and spice. Good with BBQ, red pasta sauce and pizza. **(Region 3)**

Merlot - medium to full bodied with a subtle, herbaceous flavor and soft tannins. Good with meatloaf, grilled tuna and eggplant parmesan. **(Region 3)**

Cabernet Sauvignon - complex, hearty with bold flavors of cherry, cedar and chocolate. Good with lamb, T-bone steak and wild game. **(Region 3)**

Pinot Noir - rich smooth with delicate notes of black cherries and cloves. Good with duck, salmon and turkey. **(Region 1 but is very marginally suited there)**

Lenoir - deep, dark red with notes of raspberry cinnamon, cherry-chocolate, cloves and brown sugar. Good with raspberries and chocolate, duck, venison and brisket. **(Region 3 but is very marginally suited there)**



Note: See [Starting a Vineyard](#) at the [Go Texan Wine](#) website sponsored by Texas Wine Marketing Assistance Program and the Texas Department of Agriculture