



GRAPE CREEK VINEYARD



BECKER VINEYARDS PHOTO BY BLAKE MISTICH

WINE COUNTRY

By Julie Catalano

Texas is home to the second largest grape growing region in the U.S. How did we get so lucky?

One word: terroir.

The Texas Hill Country has more than 45 wineries and vineyards, dozens more nearby, and dozens more on the way. Named a top ten wine destination by *Wine Enthusiast* in 2014, the region — second only to Napa — is exploding in wine production, wine events, wine tasting, wine clubs, wine tours and more, with no end in sight.

You could say it all started in Texas, although farther west. Spanish missionaries established the first vineyard in North America near El Paso. European settlers brought grapevine cuttings with them, growing the industry through the 1800s. In Fredericksburg — considered the epicenter of the Hill Country wine region — original settlers made wine from native mustang grapes that grew in the wild.

The diverse and unique terroir (the combination of all environmental factors that affect a crop) of the Hill Country and its dry and sunny climate and well-draining soil is particularly friendly to certain grapes. Popular varietals include Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Tempranillo, Zinfandel, Sangiovese, Malbec, Chardonnay, Blanc du Bois, Pinot Grigio, Viognier, Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc and others.

According to the Texas Wine & Grape Growers Association, the state has eight federally recognized American Viticultural (grape growing) Areas (AVA), including the Hill Country, Fredericksburg, and nearby Bell Mountain, the first appellation in Texas, established in 1986.

The Hill Country AVA was established in 1990 by Fall Creek Vineyards at Tow, the result of a trip to France in 1973 by co-founders Ed and Susan Auler. “Ed noticed that the region, with its reddish-brown soil and craggy hills, looked a lot like the Hill Country,” recalls Susan. Their first planting of French-American hybrids in 1975 makes them the oldest Hill Country winery. “There was endless potential here because of the microclimates around every bend, and complex, mineral-rich soil that changes even within vineyards. It’s all about the dirt; it’s all about the terroir.”

“Our 100-acre vineyard has four fairly distinct soil types, from sandy loam to a dark clay,” says Brian Heath, who bought Grape Creek Vineyards in Fredericksburg in 2006. To prepare an area for planting, they dig test pits, take soil samples and send them to labs. “They’ll tell us what soil types we have, which helps to tell us what we need to do differently.” No matter how diligent the growers, harvests can be ruined by the dreaded late freeze. “It’s the biggest threat,” says Heath. “It can freeze off the buds.” Hail and too much rain are two more problems.

Nichole Bendele, public relations and winery tasting room coordinator at Becker Vineyards, concurs: “Grapevines like drier conditions. Our climate is considered semi-arid. If it is too wet, you run into fungus issues and root rot.” Becker was established in 1992 in Stonewall with a first harvest in 1995.

Pontotoc Vineyard and Winery owner Carl Money grows all of their wine grapes in Pontotoc (pop. 103), about 60 miles north of Fredericksburg in the Llano Uplift. Money says soil and geography are key: “Red sandy soil allows water to get off your root system quickly. My vineyard sits at 1,700 feet elevation, the highest point in the valley, so we never lose our grapes to late freezes because they settle around it. Finally, to the north and northwest of our farm there are 3,000-foot bluffs, which protect the town and the vineyard.”

Wine events are plentiful and fun at Hill Country wineries — everything from live music and floral arrangement classes



FALL CREEK VINEYARDS

to food and wine pairings. Wine trails are popular draws: Wine Road 290 near Fredericksburg features 16 wineries, including Chisolm Trail Winery, Pedernales Cellars and Torre di Pietra. Or visit 53 wineries on the Texas Wine Trail, including Bending

Branch Winery in Comfort, Old Man Scary Cellars in San Saba and William Chris Vineyards in Hye.

Grape stomps provide wine lovers and others with the unique experience of crushing grapes with their feet at festivals that feature music, food and educational presentations. Becker Vineyards in Stonewall will hold its 22nd Annual Grape Stomp on August 25-26 and September 1-2, 2018. Fall Creek Vineyards at Tow hosts their legendary 29th Annual Grape Stomp and Harvest Festival on August 25. Participants at the Dry Comal Creek Vineyards and Winery in New Braunfels on August 5 can have their names on the label of the 2018 Foot Pressed Red Table Wine. Yum! ♦

For more information, www.visitfredericksburgtx.com, www.wineroad290.com.

MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN



BELLA VISTA RANCH

Grapes and olives have been quite a pair since ancient times, depicted in tandem in great books of history and religion, and in vineyards in Southern Europe and Northern Africa. “It’s not unusual to find them together,” says Jack Dougherty, founder and owner of Bella Vista Ranch in Wimberley where 1,200 olive trees co-exist with Bella Vista Cellars, “but it is definitely unusual to find them here.”

Like wine grapes, conditions and climate create an olive-friendly environment, especially calcareous soil, longer growing days and a longer growing season. Additionally, the trees grow year-round, and the roots are continuously developing.

According to the the Texas Association of Olive Oil (TXAOO) established in Walburg in 2016, Texas accounts for a very small — but growing — percentage of olive oil production. Aficionados sometimes have to see it for themselves, says Dougherty. “We’ve had visitors from France and Italy who came because they couldn’t believe we were growing olive trees in Texas.”