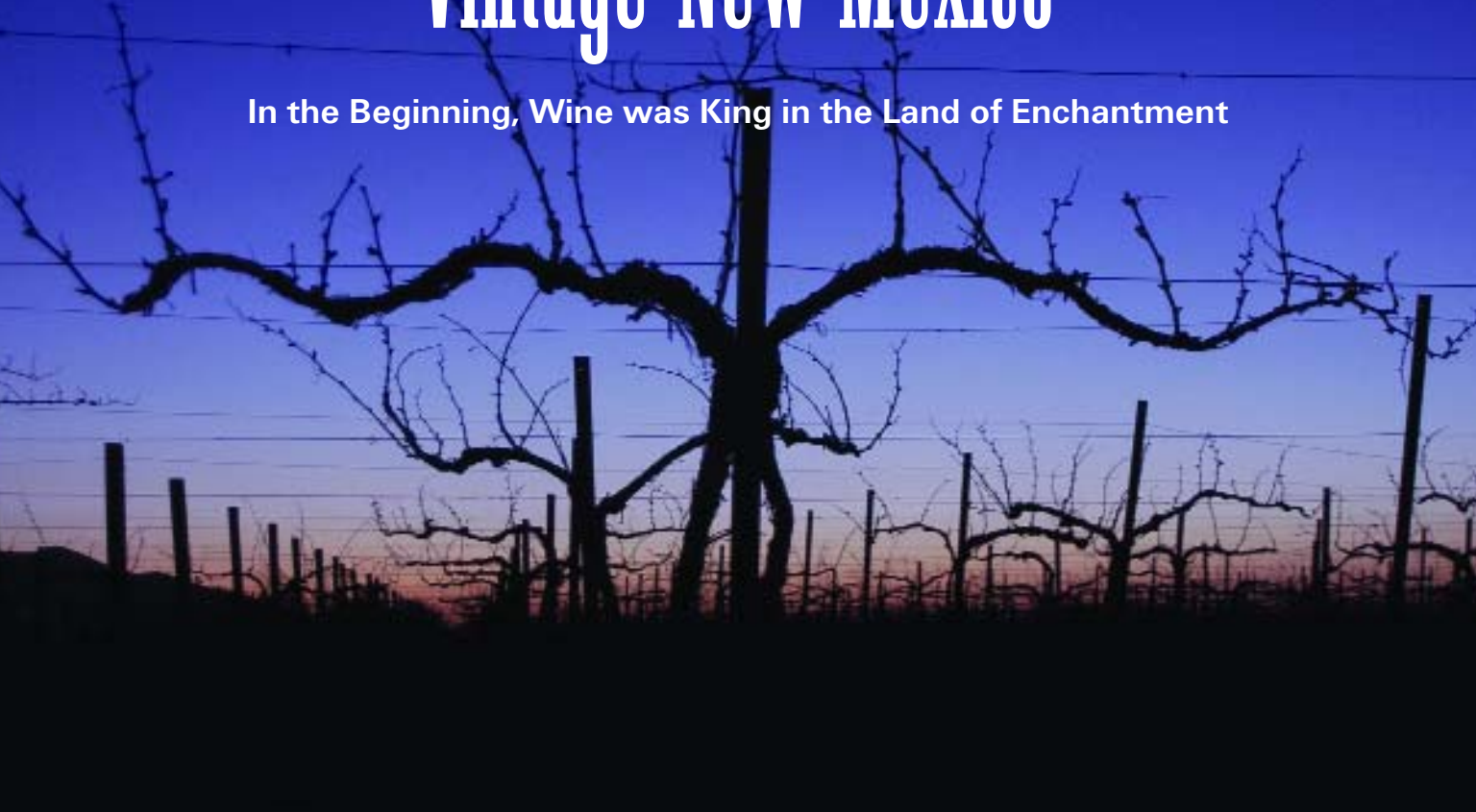


Vintage New Mexico

In the Beginning, Wine was King in the Land of Enchantment



It is the oldest *vitis vinifera* growing region in the country. At one illustrious point in its happening history, it was the fifth largest wine-producing area in the U.S. And more than a century before Spanish missionaries in California began planting the vines that would grow the grapes that would make the wine that would turn the world on its ear for today's love of a thrilling vintage – as the art and science of wine-making so evolved – it was defying the very King of Spain, who said *no way!* to the raising of grapes in the New World.

Pretty scrappy attitude there, New Mexico.

Yes, New Mexico. The year was 1629. And not only did this then-Spanish holding go right ahead and plant *vitis vinifera*, or the “mission grape,” in Senecú, a Piro Indian pueblo south of Socorro, but the wines dare made by the audacious Franciscan priest and Capucín monk set a standard that continues to this day, nearly 400 years later.

Nervy? Certainly. But don't think the challenges of New Mexico's climate – frost, hail and sometime severe winter temperatures, among them – daunt the dreams and deter the efforts of the 25 wineries here who know their state's singular blessings – high desert elevations, long warm days, cool nights – can produce wines that attract “much praise,” according to *Exploring Wine: The Culinary Institute of America's Guide to Wines of the World* – not to mention plenty of gold medals in various wine competitions. Lovers of the good thing they've got in three vine-friendly regions – the Southern Mesilla Valley, extending northward from El Paso, TX; the Mimbres Valley, a little farther west, around Deming; and the Middle Rio Grande Valley, in the environs of Albuquerque – New Mexico vintners bottle with all the bravura of their forbears.

After all, the early missionaries survived Apache attacks on their Senecú

The ancient *vitis vineferavine* - or mission grape - has a 400-year growing history in the wine region of the Southwest (above); the fruit as bud (below)



Want a whirl of a New Mexico wine tasting tour? Three different trips await the adventurous aviator (with designated driver in tow) who'd like a twirl with the local grape.

Northern Ramble: Six exciting wineries around the spectacular Sangre de Cristo Mountains bid welcome to their tasting rooms. Wing-in to Santa Fe (SAF), rent some wheels, pack a picnic and happy trails to you as you travel NM 502 west toward Los Alamos. Hwy 4 to White Rock deposits you at **Balagna Winery** for some great Italian varietals and alfresco lunch overlooking an 800-ft gorge of the Rio Grande. Hwy 84/285 then will spirit you to **Santa Fe Vineyards** for an Indian Market White unique in all of wine. North along Hwy 68 near Espanola is the **Los Luceros Winery**; here, a straw-bale tasting room sits splendidly in the midst of the oldest viticultural area in the U.S. (dating from 1598). In Velarde, the **Black Mesa Winery** pours a serious dry red, its Black Mesa Coyote. Next heading? NM 68 to NM 75 toward Dixon for **La Chirpada Winery's** oeuvre of cellar-quality reds and delightfully fruity picnic wines. Finally, to enjoy **Madison Winery's** fine dry and semi-sweet wines made from French hybrids in view of the lovely Pecos River, follow NM 75 to NM 518 (to Las Vegas), then I-25 south to Exit 323 (Villanueva) and NM 3 six miles south.

Central Excursion: Alight in Albuquerque (ABQ or AEG) for a day of wining and delighting. I-25 north to Paseo del Norte zips you to the wonderful Brut and Blanc de Noirs of **Gruet Winery**. I-25 south to I-40 west to Rio Grande Blvd. grants access to several fine tasting rooms: **Anderson Valley Vineyards**, with its tasty Balloon

A Quest for New Mexico's Best



Blush, a vintage that honors the annual hot-air balloon festival; **Casa Rondaña**, with its Bordeaux-style Cabernet Franc (and don't-miss architecture); **Milagro Winery**, with its lovingly handcrafted Zinfandel; and **Corrales Winery**, which overlooks the stunning Sandia Mountains.

Outside Albuquerque directions get complex (call 1-866-4WINENM or visit www.nmwine.com for a detailed map), but be sure to swing by **Ponderosa Valley Vineyards** on the slope of the Jemez Mountains for some award-winning Riesling, **Anasazi Fields Winery** for dry fruit wines whose grapevines are spring-fed by the same irrigation used by the native Anasazi more than 1,000 years ago; and of course friendly **Sisneros-Torres**, where the fruit of its delicious

vintages is 100 percent New Mexico-grown in the heart of the Rio Grande Valley.

Southern Rove: Touch-down in historic Las Cruces (LRU) by the meandering Rio Grande; here in the courthouse, Billy the Kid stood trial for his crimes. Hop the I-10 to Deming, where the **St. Clair Winery** shows-off such Mimbres Valley charmers as a tasty Cabernet Sauvignon, and the new **Luna Rossa Winery** offers oak-aged originals in Italian, German, Rhône and Spanish styles. The I-10 east, Mesilla exit, finds the **Blue Teal Tasting Room**, which serves-up 16 varietal and three sparkling wines with its panorama of the gorgeous Organ Mountains; off Old Medilla Plaza is the **Santa Rita/Mademoiselle Winery**, where a Pecan Delight sparkling wine is a unique delight. Hwy 28 south is a leisurely scenic roll to **La Vina Winery**, where you can picnic along the fabled Don Juan Oñate Trail. Next day, leave Las Cruces via the I-25 north to

Hwy 70/54 toward Alamogordo, where the **Heart of the Desert Tasting Room** (and art gallery) at the Eagle Ranch Pistachio Co. highlights a Pistachio Blush wine bottled in honor of the ranch's successful pistachio agri-business. A little farther along, the **Arena Blanca Winery** at McGinn's Pistachio Tree Ranch (also purveyors of pistachios) pours a noteworthy Chardonnay. Hwy 54 north comes upon the **Tularosa Winery**, where an interesting Shiraz and other varietal wines from *vinifera* grapes can be enjoyed outdoors beneath the lovely pecan trees, while Hwy 70 east to splendid Ruidoso offers a taste of **Willmon Vineyards'** pleasing array of New Mexico wines (plus a game of chess) at its busy wine bar in downtown's End of the Vine shop.

Pleasures of the Palate



A thriving New Mexico winery

pueblo (1675) and the bloody Pueblo Revolt (1680) that drove away the Spanish; the grape-farmers to follow once New Mexico became a U.S. Territory (1850) endured flood, crop disease, Prohibition and stiff competition from the Napa Valley. So? The same Right Stuff that made wines “in no way inferior to those of Spain” in 1766 (according to a Spanish inspector), wines that in the 1880s were so successful they totaled an annual output of one million gallons, and wines that in the 1980s drew enterprising souls to the challenge of becoming true blue grit-bearing New Mexico vintners...well, it's the same Right Stuff that's around today.

And true to their roots – literally – winemakers of the “Land of Enchantment” devote a full 90 percent of their vineyards to the vinifera grapes that the King of Spain in 1595 forbade its New Spain colonists to cultivate (in an effort to protect the Andalusian

farmers' market for agricultural products). Honestly, if this fruit was good enough, maybe even *charmed*, for the Catholic missionaries whose need for sacramental wine inspired them in the early 1600s to say *phooey* to Spain and plant anyway, then it has continued to be the darling of New Mexico's new wave of winemakers. These include the consortium of French, a group of Swiss and the local ranchers of Hidalgo and Luna counties who in the 1980s had a happy hunch New Mexico's relatively low-cost land and high desert climate would help them conjure up some bottled poetry, Southwest style.

They were right. Such quality producers as Anderson Valley Vineyards, the award-winning Ponderosa Valley Winery and, for traditional method sparkling wines, Gruet Winery, join vintners often tickled to experiment (care for a glass of sparkling Pecan Delight?) And aren't they

busy, indeed. With their more than 350,000 gallons of the glorious grape bottled annually and their ever-festive wine events – Memorial Day's Southern New Mexico and Albuquerque wine festivals; Fourth of July's Santa Fe Wine Festival; and Labor Day's New Mexico Wine Festival at Bernalillo and the Harvest Festival in Las Cruces – these Southwest friends of the “nectar of the gods” are well-fulfilling the prophecy uttered in the *Socorro Bullion* dated 1883 (as quoted by Henry K. Street in *The History of Wine in New Mexico*, a pamphlet published by the Ponderosa Valley Winery).

Wrote the editor: “We see in the present attention given to grape culture, an important and growing industry which, in a few years, will assume proportions of no ordinary nature.”

We'll lift our glass to that, New Mexico, *Santé!*