

# TEXAS CO-OP POWER

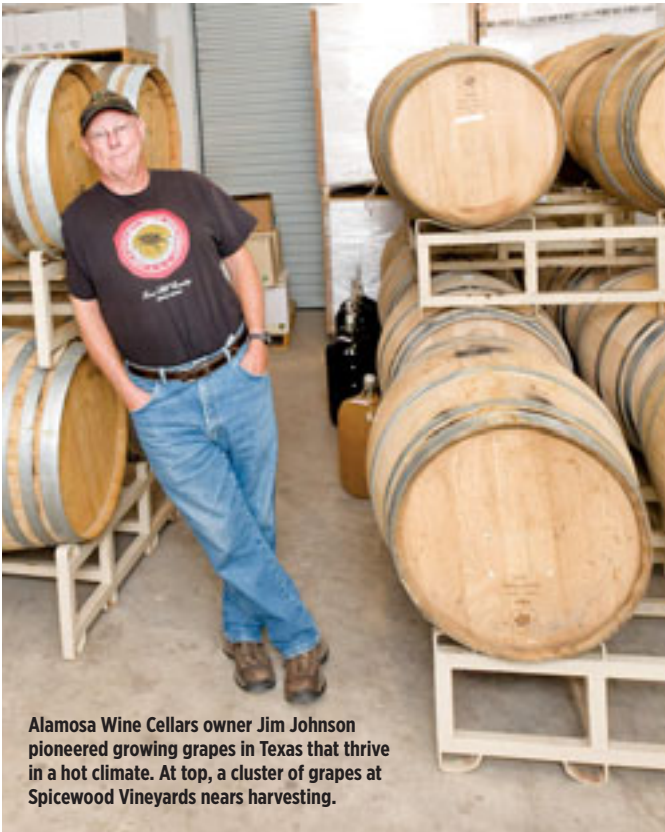
A close-up photograph of a dark wine bottle tilted, pouring a stream of red wine into a clear wine glass. The glass is perched on a large, rough, light-brown rock. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with green foliage and a tree trunk.

## *Pour* TEXAS

Add wine to our  
embarrassment  
of riches

# We Know Vino

The rest of the world is discovering, as are Texans, that our bragging rights include winemaking



Alamosa Wine Cellars owner Jim Johnson pioneered growing grapes in Texas that thrive in a hot climate. At top, a cluster of grapes at Spicewood Vineyards nears harvesting.

**A**S A GENERAL RULE, TEXANS AREN'T GREAT AT keeping secrets. We're the swaggering sort, ever poised to tell the world about our Blue Bell, our barbecue, our bluebonnets and our beer. We've got the goods, and we're highly inclined to tout them to anyone who'll listen.

But even the most loyal and loudmouthed among us might not be aware that our beloved state has been quietly cultivating another extraordinary asset. Texas is settling into its *terroir*—a French term to describe the specific environmental conditions, especially soil and climate, that influence a wine's flavor. And that, in turn, has spawned an emergent wine culture that's unlike any other in the nation. For a variety of reasons, the Texas wine industry has seen astonishing growth over the past 10 years, and by all indications, the rest of the world is catching on.

Wine Enthusiast Magazine named the Texas Hill Country one of the top 10 wine travel destinations in the world for 2014. Numerous Texas wines have recently received high honors at prominent competitions around the globe, outscoring wines that hail from many of the most celebrated viticultural regions.

The figures alone reflect an astounding expansion: The number of wineries in Texas has increased more than 500 percent, from 46 in 2001 to 293 as of December 2013. The Texas wine and grape industry contributed \$1.8 billion to the Texas economy in 2011 and is currently ranked fifth in the nation in both wine production and consumption. Clearly, we're in the midst of an epic growth spurt.



Wine in Texas is nothing new. In his book, “The Wineslinger Chronicles: Texas on the Vine” (Texas Tech University Press, 2012), Russell Kane recounts the origins of winemaking in Texas. The abbreviated explanation is that Spanish missionaries brought vines to Texas in the mid-1600s. Though the grapes survived the next 175 years, wine wasn’t terribly common or popular by the time Texas won independence from Mexico. Add in the Civil War and a host of other conflicts, and it’s plain to see, Kane writes, how such forces “delayed the civility and economic development necessary for expanding wine culture in Texas.”

Texas grape growing and winemaking accelerated in the 19th and 20th centuries, but the 18th Amendment, which outlawed producing, selling or transporting alcoholic beverages from January 1920 until its repeal in December 1933, interrupted viticultural expansion for decades. According to Kane, there were more than 50 wineries in Texas before Prohibition, and it took until the late 1990s to surpass that number. Prohibition “left a complicated and arcane set of laws” in its wake, says Kane, some of which have been lifted only recently.

Today, many refer to state legislation passed in 2003 and 2005 as the tipping point for the recent industry surge. Among other things, those changes in the law expanded wineries’ ability to ship directly to consumers and extended permission to sell and serve wine on their premises—regardless of whether they are located in a dry county.

Late wine pioneers Doc McPherson and Bob Reed are largely regarded as the fathers of the modern Texas wine industry. The two Texas Tech researchers experimented with grape growing in the Panhandle near Lubbock in the 1960s and ’70s. The area

later became the Texas High Plains American Viticultural Area, which generates more than half of the state’s wine grapes every year. The pair eventually established Llano Estacado in 1976, an iconic Texas winery near Lubbock that’s still one of the top wine producers in the state.

McPherson is thought to have been the first to plant Italian sangiovese grapes in Texas. Though he reportedly never made a commercial wine entirely from sangiovese, McPherson’s experiment reinforced the notion that grapes from regions that share climate similarities with Texas—Italy, Spain and Portugal, for example—might thrive here. Still, most vintners in the Lone Star State continued to focus on California-centric grapes, including varieties such as chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon, which don’t typically flourish in extreme heat.

In the late 1980s, Jim Johnson had a hunch that adopting California’s model might not be the most effective approach to Texas winemaking. At the time, Johnson lived in Houston and worked for NASA, but he also moonlighted at a wine store to satisfy his growing fascination with winemaking.

“I thought that there might be some grapes we could grow that could do better than what the California paradigm demanded at the time,” says Johnson, now the owner of Alamosa Wine Cellars in the Hill Country near San Saba. “It was a gut feeling. I knew there were hot places in Europe that made wines and that the wines they were making weren’t cabernet, merlot or chardonnay.”

After hearing a California vintner underscore the importance of winemaking talent in the industry, Johnson left NASA, moved to California and enrolled in the viticulture and enology program at the University of California, Davis.

**Spicewood Vineyards owner Ron Yates is as likely to be tending his grapevines—his 32 acres of grapes include European varieties such as viognier, graciano and tempranillo—as he is pouring wine for visitors eager for a taste. Yates and his staff are eager to engage guests in conversations about wine.**





After graduating in 1991, Johnson worked for wineries in California and Texas before planting his own vineyard near San Saba in 1996. He started by growing sangiovese and viognier (grapes indigenous to Italy and France, respectively) and later added tempranillo, a Spanish grape that has done so well here some have started calling it the “National Red Grape of Texas.” Alamosa released the first commercial tempranillo in Texas in 2000.

Johnson was near the forefront of the growing trend to cultivate nontraditional grapes, which include varieties most Americans haven’t heard of—tannat, souzão, mourvèdre and albariño, to name a few. Many of these grapes have been around for centuries in Europe, and they thrive in weather conditions that somewhat mirror Texas’. So far, the European grapes seem to be making themselves right at home here.

If you’ve ever been to Napa, chances are you’ve tasted plenty of California cabernet sauvignon. It accounts for 40 percent of the region’s production. Most people know that California is the undisputed wine king of America. And for that reason, many have tried to duplicate its success.

“When Oregon first started as a wine-producing state, they

were trying to emulate California and grow the same stuff,” Johnson says. “It wasn’t until they figured out that pinot noir and pinot gris were the varieties that worked best for their climate, their soil and their topography that they finally got their own chapter in ‘The World Atlas of Wine.’ ” Johnson says that he and other Texas growers and winemakers are arguably making the same types of discoveries.

The hope, of course, is that wine lovers will embrace the unconventional. But 90 percent of the domestic wine produced in the United States comes out of California, and many consumers tend to equate familiar names with quality—a bias that often keeps them from trying anything else. Dacota Haselwood, former chief governmental affairs officer at the Texas Wine and Grape Growers Association, says that tasting rooms have the right idea on how to get past such preconceptions.

“One of the things I think the Texas wine industry learned early is the best way to convince somebody that you have a good product is to get it in their mouths,” Haselwood says. “If a person walks into a tasting room and they’ve never had wine in their lives, you have much more of an opportunity to educate

Tours of wineries allow oenophiles—wine connoisseurs—to observe the production process. Clockwise from top left: Visitors get a sip of red straight from a barrel at William Chris Vineyards in Hye. Elsewhere at William Chris, a vat of white wine awaits the next step of production. An aroma wheel, inset, helps wine tasters identify the many fragrances and flavors in wine. Grapes get stirred early in the production process at Dry Comal Creek Vineyards in New Braunfels.







Clockwise from top right: Tempranillo grape vines, gaining a reputation as the ‘National Red Grape of Texas,’ bask in the Hill Country sun at Spicewood Vineyards. Grape stomp events are festive rituals at wineries across the state. At Dry Comal Creek, willing guests can partake in the Annual Order of the Purple Foot, where feet get undressed and wine glasses get wrapped. For those who prefer to limit the purple to their taste buds, Andrew Stephens offers a variety of choices in the tasting room.

them about nontraditional varietals. They’re open to trying anything. But you and I both know people who only drink white wine, and they only drink pinot grigio.”

Many in the industry say that the biggest hurdle in introducing new wines is persuading folks to try something besides what they’re attached to. But once the “new” wine hits their taste buds, they’re often sold.

## Not Everything Is Bigger

SPENDING AN AFTERNOON AT SPICEWOOD VINEYARDS, ABOUT 30 miles northwest of Austin, is like being cradled in the palm of the Texas Hill Country. A cluster of towering live oaks hangs like a canopy over the spacious, breezy porch. Visitors recline in comfy chairs and savor wine while chatting, picnicking or simply enjoying the serenity.

If you’re looking for owner Ron Yates, he’s probably the bearded guy in shorts and flip-flops pouring your wine. Yates and his staff exemplify the ethos that has given Texans a reputation for being approachable, friendly and easygoing—where

winemakers issue an invitation not only to taste great wine but also to be a part of the conversation that surrounds it, regardless of how much you know.

Wineries in Texas come in all shapes and sizes. Among the largest are Mesa Vineyards in Fort Stockton, which produces the Ste Genevieve wine brand; Becker Vineyards in Stonewall; and Llano Estacado. Those three combined accounted for more than half of the 3.2 million gallons of wine produced in Texas in 2013.

But much of the growth in the industry over the past 10 years can be attributed to a host of smaller wineries that are slowly helping define Texas wine culture. Most will never become a Mesa Vineyards or a Llano Estacado, and that’s exactly what their owners want. A growing number of vintners prefer a low-key operation, where the demands of production are high enough to sustain a business and low enough to keep them near the shop floor.

“It’s a challenge for us as we grow to keep our balance,” says John Rivenburgh, a co-founder of Bending Branch, a boutique winery in Comfort. “As you get bigger, obviously there are more things you’ve got to do. When there’s more work, it’s a little harder to taste wines with people. We’re definitely striving to keep that small, intimate feeling about our place.”

There are differing opinions about what constitutes a “boutique” winery. Usually the term refers to small, sometimes family-owned and operated cellars that produce wine in limited quantities. The emphasis is less on volume and the size of the facility and more on the art of winemaking and creating a communal experience around it. Bending Branch typifies that approach. It’s not that large wineries don’t make spectacular wines or provide stellar tasting experiences. Many do. But you’re not as likely to run into the winemakers or the owners when you’re in their tasting rooms.

Johnson is a good example of an “artisan” winemaker, meaning he’s at the helm of every step of the process at Alamosa Wine Cellars—from growing the grapes to bottling the wine. In all likelihood, you’ll find him in the tasting room because he’s there about 80 percent of the time it’s open. Rivenburgh and his co-founder (and father-in-law), Bob Young, stay busy tending to the 16 grape varieties they’ve planted in their vineyard. But they also intentionally spend time in the tasting room whenever they can.

Bobby Cox, a legendary viticultural consultant who has been a key player in the evolution of the Texas wine industry, says that what Texas has to offer is not only great wines but also a highly accessible experience. That sociable vibe is in direct contrast to the elitism that many attribute to Napa.

“Part of the problem of establishing a consumer base in Texas is that all too often people assume that they don’t know enough to drink wine,” Cox says. “They think it’s too formal; it’s kind of a crooked pinkie thing. But that’s not the way it is in Texas; we want wine to be fun.”

If the online calendars of many Texas wineries are any indication, Cox is spot on. Plans for 2014 include stargazing parties, grape stomps, cook-offs, barrel tastings, gourmet pairings and live music galore. And that’s the short list.

“Texas wines are more like the ones you would find on your vacation in Italy than your vacation in California,” Cox says. “One of the subliminal reasons that we love our Italian wines is that Lucille Ball stomped grapes in Italy, not France. It’s the fun aspect, the casual aspect. You don’t have to know about the wines to enjoy them.”

*Laura Jenkins is an Austin writer and photographer.*

# FIELD GUIDE to BASTROP COUNTY

ISSUE  
No 38



## Bed & Breakfast

BASTROP / ELGIN / SMITHVILLE



Whether it's catching up on some Z's or catching largemouth bass, there is always somewhere to relax or fish\* in Bastrop County. Come stay a weekend with us and get away without having to go far away.

EXPLORE OUR FRIENDLY NATURE. [EXPLOREBASTROPCOUNTY.COM](http://EXPLOREBASTROPCOUNTY.COM)

\*Please don't serve your wife raw fish.