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GRAPE EXPECTATIONS

Time is ripe for promising alternative crop

Nevadans are not used to seeing vineyards in their neighborhood. Kathy Halbardier '93 (MBA) found that out after she and husband, Rick, planted 1,500 grape vines at their home in Genoa.

“We were turned in for growing pot,” she says. “Douglas County sheriffs showed up and said there were complaints by the neighbors.”

By John Wheeler '86, '87M.A. is an associate editor of *Nevada Silver & Blue*.

That was in the early 1990s. The Halbardiers were just beginning an endeavor that's since seen them establish Tahoe Ridge Winery. Their Genoa operation has

grown from producing 3,000 bottles a year five years ago to more than 100,000 today. Although they have successfully produced and sold a wine made solely from Nevada grapes (it was gobbled up at more than \$30 a bottle), virtually all their wines are made from California grapes. That's also true of Nevada's oldest winery, the Pahrump Valley Winery, 62 miles west of Las Vegas.

“We remind people that even some of the most well-known wineries in California don't grow any grapes; they buy all their grapes from different sources,” says owner Bill Loken. “So we really act just like a normal California winery.”

Like the Halbardiers, Loken is attempting to produce a Nevada-grown wine. He planted a vineyard on his property and anticipates having some Pahrump wine to sell next year.

So what are the odds of Nevada having a home-grown wine industry that amounts to more than just the occasional release of a few thousand bottles? Pretty good, say once-skeptical experts like the Grant Cramer, a biochemist in the University of Nevada, Reno College of Agriculture, Biotechnology and Natural Resources who has been making wine from grapes grown at the University's experimental plot in downtown Reno since 1999.



Jean Dixon

Siri Frey, a senior at Churchill County High School, joins in the grape harvesting on her family's farm in Fallon.

"We have shown that it is viable," he says. "I just came back from Romania. They grow grapes in colder climates than here, and they've been doing it for 3,000 years."

It doesn't take that long to develop expertise, though. Washington State began planting vineyards in the 1960s and now boasts more than 500 wineries.

"Based on a study of vineyards in Washington state ranging from 10 acres to 40 acres, they were breaking even from their investments in between two and five years," Cramer says.

Even more intriguing is a graduate thesis by Miguel Henry in the college's Department of Resource Economics that demonstrates that alfalfa is actually a money-losing crop consuming 12 times more water than a vineyard. More than 90 percent of Nevada's irrigated agricul-

tural lands are devoted to alfalfa, which is primarily used to feed livestock. Henry's research indicates Nevada farmers could be making from \$5,000 to \$7,500 an acre growing wine grapes instead of losing money growing alfalfa.

So what's stopping them? Roger Gehring thinks he has the answer.

"Old habits die hard," says the Las Vegas educator who grows both alfalfa and wine grapes on his Amargosa Valley property, 88 miles northwest of Las Vegas. "Not many people sit down and think, 'How can I do this better?' What they normally do is say, 'I'm growing alfalfa, how can I grow it better?'"

Gehring is one of a number of nonfarmers in various parts of the state who are, nonetheless, pioneers in moving a potential wine industry forward. He's contracted to sell his grapes

to Tahoe Ridge, which has also established relationships with other small growers. If Gehring's initial five-acre vineyard is successful, he has 40 acres of alfalfa he can convert, he says. Similarly, Bob Reagan, a field engineer at the Yucca Mountain radioactive waste repository, has begun planting vines on 1.5 acres of a five-acre parcel in Crystal Heights, about 80 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

"I have another 20 acres that I can potentially put another 12,000 vines on," says Reagan, who along with Gehring is getting research assistance from Bob Morris of the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension in Las Vegas. "I want to be a grape farmer. That will be my retirement hobby. I didn't even want to say I

Continues on page 22

BRIEFS

NEVADA EXPORTS — ESPECIALLY TO MACAU

Nevada is not known as one of the country's export powerhouses. However, Nevada's exports jumped from just over \$2 billion in 2003 to almost \$4 billion in 2005, and over the last three years the state has ranked among the top three states for the growth of its exports.

That's due in part to Macau, the former Portuguese colony an hour's ferry ride west of Hong Kong. Exports from Nevada to Macau were up 226 percent in the first six months of 2006, compared with the year before, to more than \$11 million. It's a gaming hotspot whose revenues rival those of the four-mile, hotel/resort-adorned Las Vegas Strip. In 2005, Macau generated \$5.6 billion in casino-gambling revenue compared with Las Vegas' \$6 billion.

"Macau is going through a very rapid expansion right now," says Bill Eadington, professor of economics and director of the University's Institute for the Study of Gambling and Commercial Gaming. "They are buying a lot of capital equipment that is very gaming-industry specific."

That's good news for gaming-machine and software producers such as Nevada-based International Game Technology and Bally

Technologies. The other primary reason for the boost in exports was the more-than-25 percent rise in the price of gold in 2005. The higher price bumped up that commodity's export value.

Some Nevada export facts:

- The total dollar value of Nevada's exports: almost \$4 billion (2005)
- Number of countries Nevada exports to: about 150
- No. 1 export country for Nevada: Switzerland.

Nevada's income from exports to Switzerland (almost \$2 billion in 2005) is twice that of No. 2 Canada. It's nearly all gold, according to Al DiStefano, director of global trade and investment for the state Commission on Economic Development. "There are Swiss companies that buy it and refine it up to 99.999 percent pure," he says. A major use of so-called "five nines" gold is as a fine wire that connects computer circuits to semiconductors.

ONE CHART NEVADA WOULD PREFER NOT TO TOP

Nevada is one of the fastest-growing states ... in global-warming pollution.

That's the finding of a recent study by the

nonpartisan Public Interest Research Group. Between 1960 and 2001 Nevada's carbon-dioxide emissions increased 835 percent. Only Alaska had a higher rate of emissions growth during that period.

"The growth was primarily due to growth in population," says state climatologist and University geography professor Jeff Underwood. "In 1960 our population was approximately 250,000. Now it is close to 3 million."

Underwood says that even though the percentage increase is enormous, Nevada is still one of the lowest carbon-dioxide output states in the nation.

"In big states like California, the growth wasn't great, but the net amount they put in the atmosphere is extraordinarily bigger than us," he says.

Coal combustion accounted for 43 percent of the state's increase, the report indicates. Since 1960, Nevada has added nearly 2,800 megawatts of new, coal-burning power plant capacity. But oil and natural gas use were also major factors.

"Adding carbon dioxide into the atmosphere does us no good," Underwood says. "I would hope that over the next 40 years, Nevada will be somewhat on the leading edge of reducing carbon emissions."

was growing a vineyard until the things grew, but they are growing like weeds.”

That’s not necessarily a good thing in the oven-like temperatures of southern Nevada. Wine grapes need to mature slowly and like hot days and cool nights to develop a desirable sugar-acid balance. One location with that approximately 40-degree temperature differential is Fallon.

“This is a good agricultural area for a couple of reasons,” says Debbie Frey ’73 (art), who along with her husband, Charlie ’70 (accounting) and son, Colby (currently a business student), is successfully growing wine on 10 acres of the family farm. “This is kind of like a banana belt and that’s why Fallon is really famous for its cantaloupes and its melons.”

The Freys have an edge over some others attempting to grow wine grapes in Nevada: They are professional farmers working tried-and-tested land.

“We read in one of the trade magazines that the best way to get good wine is from a good farmer,” Debbie Frey says. “We have really good soil. This is old farm ground.”

Old indeed. A lush decorative arbor of Concord grapes in front of the Freys’ house was planted 60 years ago. Working with University of Nevada Extension’s Jay Davison, the Frey family started an experimental vineyard just five years ago. Today, it’s likely they have more vines than the rest of the state combined, with the potential for much more; they have 730 acres of alfalfa.

The Freys’ success will likely stimulate other farmers in the region to convert some of their land to wine grapes.

“It would be really nice to have a lot of small vineyards around,” Debbie Frey says. “The way we could all afford it is to have a co-op — share the equipment and the labor pools. We want the industry to be successful. We want Rick and Kathy to be successful. We want Amargosa Valley to be successful. We know we can make a really good wine. We think this could be a new tourist industry for the state.”

LOOK ONLINE

For more information on growing grapes and making wine in Nevada: ag.unr.edu/cramer/nevadawinegrapes.htm.

BOOM TOWN



John Wheeler

Name: Pahrump

Where: 62 miles west of Las Vegas, 39 miles south of the Nevada Test Site, where the nation’s nuclear weapons were tested from 1945 to 1992.

Name comes from: the Paiute words *pah* and *rimpi*, for springs or flowing waters emerging from a rock.

Square miles: 277

Population, 1990: 7,424

Population, now: 37,000+

No. of cinemas, 1990: 0

No. of cinemas now: 0

Distinguishing characteristics: reputed to be a haven for people in the federal Witness Protection Program; weather is sunny 216 days a year, second only to Yuma, Ariz.

Best-known resident: Art Bell, who, until his recent move to the Philippines, broadcast his nationally syndicated radio show, *Coast to Coast AM* (yes, the one that talks about aliens), from his Pahrump home.

Why it’s booming: Rising home prices in Las Vegas have made Pahrump attractive as a bedroom community.

No. 1 problem: lack of water. “There are about 11,000 wells in the Pahrump Valley and water levels have declined as much as 100 feet over some portions of the basin. . . . The Chamber of Commerce for years has been saying this is the third-largest aquifer in the United States and that’s just a blatant misrepresentation,” says Tom Buqo, consulting hydrogeologist for Nye County, which includes Pahrump.

Best place to meditate: The labyrinth at the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension office’s demonstration garden. Built by graduates of the extension service’s Pahrump Master Gardener program, the labyrinth, or maze, is listed on the National Registry of Labyrinths. It attracts international visitors.

Happy Pahrumpian: “It’s great that we’re just one hour from Vegas. . . . all the shopping and great restaurants we could ever want, and it’s nice to come home to peace and quiet and tranquility,” says Cheryl Beeman, acting planning director for the Pahrump Regional Planning District and a Pahrump resident for six years.

