

# An Industry on the Vine

## Partnership promotes Oklahoma wines as connoisseurs question quality

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Strebel Creek Vineyard in Oklahoma City.

OKLAHOMA CITY – The Oklahoma Grape Industry Council is partnering with the Oklahoma Restaurant Association to get more local wines onto local restaurant tables. Even though that synergistic business relationship would seem to be good for both industries, it's only potentially positive for the consumer, some wine connoisseurs said. Many of Oklahoma's wines simply aren't ready for market, at least not yet.

"This can be a good thing if it's all done the right way," said Clayton Bahr, a broker for Putnam Wines Ltd. in Oklahoma City. "There's a lot of potential out there. There was a Gewürztraminer made locally and a Riesling this year that were fantastic, and I can't think of any restaurant that wouldn't want to put those wines on their list.

"But too many others only think they're doing it right," Bahr said. "Experts in the industry know what wine flaws are; they're obvious problems in the process that can be fixed if they would just take the time to fix them. A lot of our Oklahoma wineries seem to have a lot of those flaws."

The collaborative market promotion will take the shape of a postcard campaign, enabling diners to leave notes at favorite restaurants to prod them into adding local wines to the menu, said Gene Clifton, president of the Oklahoma Grape Industry Council. The campaign has a political aspect to it as well. Some Oklahoma wineries do not distribute their product to retail liquor stores and restaurants because of the annual licensing fee. Mike Greenfield of Greenfield Vineyards and Winery in Chandler said the grape industry association hopes increased consumer demand will lead to legislative change.

"With a rich history in grape vineyards and wine, Oklahoma is poised to become a grape and wine leader in the south central U.S.," Clifton said.

Bahr and others in the industry agree, but add that Oklahoma's success depends on the state's overall vintner skill level – putting bad wine on restaurant tables leads to badly trained palates, at best, and potentially turns consumers away entirely.

Bruce Rinehart at Rococo restaurant in Oklahoma City cited a Shiraz blend, the Impressao, from Tidal School Vineyards in Drumright as a particularly worthy example of wine done right, and said he wished similar success for other Oklahoma vintners. The Impressao won a gold medal at the Lone Star International Wine competition. “We want to support Oklahoma wines,” Rinehart said. “And when we can, we do.”

Other restaurant operators said they were reluctant to publicly criticize their colleagues. One manager who asked to not be identified said it would be political suicide to discuss the industry's faults. In general, they described Oklahoma wines as immature, with a few bright exceptions.

Bahr said some producers in Oklahoma aren't concerned about improving their product as long as they make a minimum level of profit, often through tourism vineyard visits and small arts festivals promotions. However, that's not true of all vintners who explore the same revenue streams, he said, because others do push themselves to listen to feedback and get better.

“In one of the blind taste tests at the wine competition I was judging at the State Fair, there was one old-school winery that showed up in nearly every category, truly horrible stuff you didn't even want to smell, let alone taste, it was so bad,” Bahr said. “People have tried to talk to him (the vintner), but he just doesn't want the help.”

He said the core issue is one of education for those in the local industry – not to develop an air of academic elitism, but simply to understand what is generally recognized as good practices and good final product.

It's a Catch-22 problem, as studied extensively by psychologists David A. Dunning and Justin Kruger and initially reported about a decade ago in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. The Dunning-Kruger effect, as it came to be known, suggests that unskilled people do not realize when they've reached erroneous conclusions because they've never been taught otherwise, and in their ignorance they feel confident that their output is better than average. Once they learn the appropriate skills, their confidence actually takes a hit but their output is improved.

In other words, the skills required to be truly competent are the same skills necessary to recognize competence, a double conundrum.

Andrew Snyder agreed with Bahr that education is the answer to improving Oklahoma's offerings from the vine. Snyder is a professor of viticulture and enology at Redlands Community College in El Reno, where he oversees the operation of the Chapel Creek Winery, a student-run facility. Inexperienced vintners or those who are unfamiliar with industry improvements are most likely to ruin their wines with oxidation, he said, a problem that can be easily solved once it's recognized.

“Oklahoma wines have made great progress in the past few years and continue to get better as our grapes mature and our wine makers hone their skills,” Snyder said. “Education is the difference-maker ... and I'm not just saying that because I'm the guy offering it.

“We're looking at an industry that can improve as they embrace the educational opportunities that exist,” he said.