

[back to story page](#)
Journal

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Variety Grows in N.M.'s Wines

By **Jim Hammond**

For the Journal

WINE COUNTRY: In my travels I still run into many wine-knowledgeable people who ask, "They make wine in New Mexico?" While many locals are aware of the quality of our wines, this has not translated into nationwide awareness. However, we are blessed with many quality wineries, and attention—even acclaim—is building.

Several New Mexico wines have won gold, silver and bronze national and international awards, including Gruet, La Chiripada, Casa Rondeña, Luna Rossa and St. Clair wineries. Many of those have scored high in state competitions.

Wine production in New Mexico began in the early 1600s, making it the oldest wine-producing area in the United States. (I can already hear the Californians gagging over their Chardonnay.)

Wine production increased until the late 1800s, but vineyards along the Rio Grande, where most plantings were located, were blighted by excessive sediment deposits, and the grapes were strangled with root rot. Prohibition shut the door until a rebirth of wine making in the 1980s.

In the past couple of decades, New Mexico wineries have grown in number and quality; the New Mexico Wine Growers Association lists more than 30. These are divided into three regions—Northern, Central, and Southern—with Albuquerque wines forming the majority of the Central region. Most of the Northern region wineries hug the Rio Grande between Santa Fe and Taos. In the Southern region, the wineries are spread between Tularosa, Las Cruces and Deming. Check out nmwine.com for detailed information and wine maps.

Sweet creativity

When I first arrived in New Mexico in 1999, I was not overly impressed with many of the wines I sampled, considering them too sweet for my palate. Many of the sweeter wines do pair well with our local cuisine, which may have been one of the reasons for the high number of sweeter varieties.

Several up-and-coming wineries have met the demand for a broader range of wines. Now many drier varieties of reds and whites are available, many in the California or French style. Dare I suggest that the influx of Californians influenced this?

A review of recent offerings from New Mexico wineries reveals that

vintners are using several Italian, French and German wine grapes, as well as other European varieties— including some I had to look up because I wasn't familiar with them. Clearly, the desire to experiment with different wine varieties is a sign of a robust wine industry.

Years ago, though, I remember attending my first New Mexico wine festival in Bernalillo. My wife asked one winery for their most complex red wine. What she was looking for was a dry wine with lots of structure and a variety of flavors. What she got was Sweet Lucy, which caused her eyes to cross. Well, it was sweet, I'll give them that, and quite tasty within its genre, but her term "complex" had not translated well.

That's when we began to notice that a lot of the wineries created unique names for their varieties, perhaps copying the Australians who, up until then, had a lock on creative wine naming.

Festival etiquette

This brings me to one of my pet peeves, encountered at many public wine tasting events, which is staying at the front of the line until all the wines have been sampled. More appropriate etiquette would be to make your request, engage the pourer in only enough banter to ensure you get a generous pour and then step out so the next person in line can get a taste.

On the other hand, when you go to any of our local wineries, unless the tasting room is very crowded— which is a good sign— you can find a space up front and sample to your heart's content.

If visiting local wineries to taste their wine is new to you, take along some friends and watch how quickly smiles appear and a sense of warmth envelopes you. Or to quote Ben Franklin, "Behold the rain which descends from heaven upon our vineyards, and which incorporates itself with the grapes, to be changed into wine, a constant proof that God loves us, and loves to see us happy."

While you are there, don't forget to thank the wine makers for their commitment to good wine and the expanding popularity of New Mexico wines. Salut!

Jim Hammond has been exploring wines in North America, Europe and Australia for more than 20 years. A published author, he includes information about wine in every book. You can reach Jim at jim@jim-hammond.com

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[Back to story page](#)