

Raise a glass to success in Texas

Contest shows Lone Star State viticulture gaining

By DALE ROBERTSON Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle

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KIEPERSOL VINEYARDS PHOTOS

Winemaker Marnelle de Wet Durrett, who apprenticed in Napa Valley, Calif., says cabernet is flourishing at Kiepersol Vineyards, which she calls "a sweet spot for the grape, even though we don't get the cold nights that we wish we did." Kiepersol won two Texas Wine Cup gold medals with cab-based wines.

Among the gold medalists in the Texas Wine Cup competition were the 2006 Kiepersol Estates Barrel No. 33 Texas Wish ...

... and the 2006 Kiepersol Estates Cabernet Sauvignon.

We're in the middle of Texas Wine Month, so a celebration of the state's improving viticulture is in order.

Once it might have been said: Just because grapes can be grown here doesn't mean they should be. We don't have a Napa or a Mendoza, never mind a Médoc or a Côte d'Or. Rather, Texas terroir is all too often a source of terr-woe. Nonetheless, as more skilled winemakers enter the mix and the weekend hobbyists surrender, the overall quality level continues to improve.

I'm told the proof was in the tasting at the recent Texas Wine Cup competition, organized and presided over by Glazer's Guy Stout, the Master Sommelier who has himself planted a syrah vineyard in the Hill Country. Stout is an unapologetic booster of the industry in Texas, for obvious reasons, but he didn't participate in the judging. Those charged with awarding the medals were far more inclined to be skeptics than boosters.

Still, five gold medals, a dozen silvers and 13 bronzes were handed out in the blind tasting of nearly 90 wines, which had to be made from at least 75 percent Texas-grown grapes. The consensus seemed to be that the 2008 competition was markedly superior to that of 2007.

As judge Marcy Jimenez, the buyer for Houston Wine Merchant, told Stout, a bronze at the Texas Open is like a silver or a gold at other competitions. In other words, there was no — wink, wink — grading on the curve.

Jimenez and fellow panelist Sarée Mulhern, neither of whom has Texas roots, admitted being more than pleasantly surprised by how well-made the best offerings were.

"I'd definitely have them on my wine list," said Mulhern, the sommelier at Mark's. "In fact, I do plan to add a few."

Two of Texas' largest producers, Messina Hof in Bryan and Becker in the Hill Country, opted not to submit wines. Otherwise, the state's major players participated. Stout and former Chronicle wine writer Michael Lonsford, a judge, co-founded the Texas Cup a dozen years ago, and Stout says he has seen consistent improvement since.

"You really do see a change," he said. "We're coming on nicely with the reds — there's a huge difference there. And the whites, long our shining stars, aren't as spotty. The industry in Texas is definitely on the upswing. It's not just doctors and lawyers deciding they want to make wine. Professionals have gotten interested."

But the pros can't fix what ails our capricious climate. Only in the Panhandle do they get suitable daily temperature variations during the ripening season. The Hill Country has good soil, but the hot afternoons don't give way to cool nights, which is especially hard on chardonnay and cabernet.



It's not accidental that Stout chose to grow syrah, because it's a hearty, heat-tolerant grape that, along with tempranillo, probably offers the greatest potential for future excellence.

The Kiepersol Vineyards near Tyler defied the odds by claiming two gold medals from the judges with cabernet-based wines. Winemaker Marnelle de Wet Durrett, who apprenticed at Trefethen Vineyards in Napa, says cab is flourishing on the property, which she calls "a sweet spot for the grape, even though we don't get the cold nights that we wish we did."

Raymond Haak, whose well-crafted madeira won a silver medal and whose blanc du bois and tempranillo won bronzes, likens growing grapes in Texas to sculpting an elephant from a block of granite.

"You just chip away everything that's not the elephant," he said, meaning that the state's winemakers are gradually learning to go with what actually works instead of what they want to work.

Texas Open gold medalists

- 2007 Brennan Hills Austin St. Comanche Rose (\$10): The Comanche winery, founded in 2001, has been recognized for its viognier (the 2006 took Grand Star Award honors for best Texas white at the Lone Star International Wine Competition). And now the rosé takes a star turn (www.brennanvineyards.com).
- 2006 Kiepersol Estates Barrel No. 33 Texas Wish (\$50) and 2006 Kiepersol Estates Cabernet Sauvignon (\$22): The former comes from the 51-acre property's very best cabernet vines, which are blended with a little merlot and sangiovese. The latter is all cab and Old World in style, with less than 13 percent alcohol. The winery's first vintage was 2000 (www.kiepersol.com).
- 2007 Flat Creek Muscato Blanco (\$15.95) and 2006 Flat Creek Estate (no longer available): Founded in 1998, the 80-acre winery east of Marble Falls is best known for its muscats but also makes a Super Texan with sangiovese, of course (www.flatcreekestate.com).

Go to chron.com/food for a list of the silver- and bronze-medal-winning wines.

Take the plunge?

Growing grapes in Texas is hard, sometimes thankless work. But if you think you'd like to give it a shot, the Texas AgriLife Extension Service is offering a Prospective Winegrape Growers Workshop in Saint Jo 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Oct. 23.

The registration fee is \$125 for individuals and \$200 for couples. It includes lunch and study materials. For more information or to register, go to agrilifevents.tamu.edu.

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MORE TEXAS OPEN MEDALISTS

SILVER

- White: 2007 Spicewood Vineyards Texas Hill Country Chardonnay, 2007 Llano Estacado Signature White, 2007 Woodrose Winery Texas Rain, 2007 Llano Estacado Chenin Blanc, 2007 Haak Vineyards Semi-Sweet Blanc du Blois.
- Red: NV Cross Roads CSM Red Table Wine, 2005 Flat Creek Estate Texas Hill Country Syrah, 2007 Llano Estacado Signature Rhone Blend, 2006 Pillar Bluff Williams Ranch Vineyard, 2006 Kiepersol Estates Merlot, 2007 Lone Oak Winery Tempranillo, 2006 Flat Creek Super Texan Sangiovese.
- Dessert: 2003 Haak Vineyards Jacques Madeira.

BRONZE

- White: 2007 Llano Estacado Montsec Chardonnay, 2007 Spicewood Texas Hill Country Barrel Select, 2006 Llano Estacado "Cellar Reserve," 2007 Brennan Vineyards Comanche County Viognier, 2007 Llano Estacado Sauvignon Blanc, Pleasant Hills Collina Bianca Blanc du Bois NV.
- Red: 2005 Pillar Bluff Boar Doe red blend, 2006 Pillar Bluff Boar Doe red blend, 2001 Brennans Vineyard Fall Syrah, 2006 KE Cellars Syrah 4 You, KE Cellars Cabernet 4 You, 2005 Texas Hills Kick Butt Cab, 2005 Pleasant Hill Merlot, 2006 Haak Tempranillo, 2005 Viviano, Superiore Rosso Sangiovese, Pillar Bluff Ruby Port NV.

