

Proud Tradition to New Beginnings

The first winemaking in New Mexico stemmed from the need for sacramental wine in New Spain. As a Spanish Crown edict prohibited wine growing in New Spain, the requisite transport of wine from Spain brought it across the ocean from Cadiz, via Veracruz, then overland to Mexico City and finally along the Jornada del Muerte to Santa Fe. A number of missions were established during the mid 1500's, after the "conquest," as the Catholic Church pursued its quest for souls (and of course, gold and real estate).

The difficulty of transporting the wine to the New World, a two year journey, via this arduous route precipitated innovative activities on the part of settlers here. Franciscan monks smuggled Monica grape vines into New Spain and searched up and down the Rio Grande River Valley for a place that would replicate the terroir (climate, altitude, soil, mineral content) and climate of central Spain. They decided on the unique terroir of the middle Rio Grande River Valley as the ideal locale to establish the first vineyards at a small mission called Senecu, south of present day Socorro. Frey Marcos de Zufiga is considered to be among the first, if not THE first, to instigate this crime, which in 1633 resulted in the first wine produced in what is now New Mexico.

In the early 1600's, the entire western European history of the Americas was just beginning. Now, over 300 years later, it is appropriate that we think about and celebrate the early contributions to the New World as Albuquerque looks to starting its year-long commemoration of its founding.

By 1885 New Mexico winemaking was so prolific that New Mexico became the fifth largest area in what was to become the United States, producing 910,000 gallons, or twice the number of gallons of wine as New Mexico currently produces. Floods, California bulk wine marketing in the late 1880's and, subsequently, Prohibition had a drastic effect on wine making here, such that by the time Prohibition was rescinded, wine making in both New York and California far and away out produced New Mexico. Did you know that subsequent to the European phylloxera epidemic in the 1860's, it was an American winery that stepped up to save the French wine industry? Stone Hill Winery in Herman, Missouri became the largest producer of wine for French wine drinkers for ten years around the turn of the 20th century. It is important to remember that the majority of European grape vines exist on American root stocks which are phylloxera resistant. Once again, it seems the French may have forgotten to whom they should be most thankful.

During the years immediately after World War II there was prolific wine making, especially among scientists working at the state's various laboratories. One of New Mexico's more successful wineries is La Chiripada, which was started by two counter-culture transplants from California in the 1970's, and it continues to thrive near the Rio Grande in Dixon in northern New Mexico. Home winemaking turned into commercial endeavors as vineyards struggled through the 1970's, many producing wine that is considered by today's standards undrinkable.

French, Swiss, and German families and partners in the early 1980's purchased land near Deming or east of Truth or Consequences, when New Mexico plantings once again rose to reach Civil War era production levels. A vast majority of western Europeans of that era abandoned wine making operations after a decade, but a few visionaries stayed on, exhibiting patience, persistence and a deep belief in New

Mexico as a great winemaking region. Among them is the Gruet family who grow their fruit near Engel, New Mexico, and is the third largest Champagne producer in America. As a fellow winemaker, I am proud that Gruet is here, as they exhibit to the world that some of the best wines can, and do, come from New Mexico. Their award-winning wines have been recognized in London, San Francisco, New York and Paris.

Winemaking is an art form that transcends cultural boundaries. Among music, art, and architecture; wine making is a prime example of a universal language unlike any other. As the winemaker at Casa Rondeña Winery, I am committed to creating wines that are a reflection of our history, our culture and our region.

From humble but worthy roots to 21st century new beginnings, the wine industry and, closer to home, wine making in Los Ranchos de Albuquerque has traveled an interesting and agriculturally challenging path in this beautiful land. The spirit of bringing forth not only the fruit of the vine but also the cultural flowering of the arts in New Mexico is at the core of what this particular winemaker would like to bring to his neighbors and friends from near and far.

John Calvin is the founder, owner and winemaker of Casa Rondeña Winery. Although a world traveler, John is a native of Albuquerque's North Valley, has a degree in music and has been in the winemaking business for 20 years. John has also been a well known designer and builder of adobe buildings in New Mexico for the past 30 years.



Photo Courtesy of Albuquerque the Magazine.