

El Dorado Passport vintners weather first weekend

By Susan Wood

PLACERVILLE – El Dorado County wineries represent a gutsy, resilient lot.

First, some have found their pricing endured the economic recession.

Plus, an aging America hasn't dampened the spirits of a youth movement interested in wine – with this county being no exception.

Now, a wild winter came out in full force this past weekend when a major storm Saturday knocked out power to some of the mostly southern wineries during their premier event – Passport weekend. The event prompts wineries in the association to feature their product of Chardonnays, Viogniers, Barberas, Sirahs and signature Zinfandels as well as cook for the wine lovers on tour.

The power went out at around noon at Charles B. Mitchell Winery off Fairplay Road. Thankfully, the staff was still able to cook its wood-fired pizzas outside.



Charles B.
Mitchell
winery workers
Kyle Gazlay

and Noelle
Savage serve
up the wood-
fired pizzas.
Photo/Susan
Wood

Elliot Graham at Busby Cellars noticed that attendance dropped off to almost half the 600 wine drinkers who usually tour the wineries on the Passport day.

At Latcham Winery off Omo Ranch Road, the storm and power outage prompted the staff and customers to improvise.

“We dressed warmer the second day,” regular customer Sheila Sanchez of Somerset said Sunday on her family’s second day of their outing.

“We lit lots of candles,” winery owner Margaret Latcham said Sunday.

She tried to seize the generator from her nephew running its sister winery, Granite Springs, but to no avail.

“Sorry, Auntie Margaret. You’re not getting the generator,” Latcham quipped, as she recalled what he said. Being that they had no heat, staff wore gloves.

“It was like a wine cave,” Latcham added. The staff scrambled to find light.

Customers cleared out – many to the north end of the tour route – but returned on Sunday. And next weekend’s forecast appears to look like a blue skies Passport event when the association hosts its second weekend on April 2 and 3.

The wine business comes with its ebbs and flows of trends in agriculture and consumer demand. Adjustment is the name of the game.

Two trends have made Latcham and other vintners pleased with business – more younger drinkers contributing to a segment returning to the pricier wines than the bottles that were bought at the start of the severe economic recession.

For that, Latcham's maestro of winemaking, Ruggero Mastroserio, has introduced an ultra premium label of Zinfandel, which was on the table for tasting and buying at as much as \$50 a bottle. Latcham is well known for its quality Zins hovering at about \$14 to \$30 a bottle as well as their signature table wines – Gold Rush Red and Gold Rush White. They can be picked up for as low as \$8 a bottle with wine discounts and bulk pricing.

The middle-of-the-road wines priced over \$20 are being bought up in greater numbers according to the Nielsen Co., which tracks U.S. wine trends. Total U.S. wine sales rose 4.1 percent to \$9.3 billion last year. Recent studies have pointed to the millennial generation as an up-and-coming market joining its baby boomer counterparts.

"We're definitely seeing more young people buying wine," Latcham confirmed.

The same goes for Charles B. Mitchell wine tasting room manager Patty Forester. She had noticed many wine buyers seeking "a sale" when the recession hit. Moreover, some were canceling their wine club memberships because spouses lost their jobs. Things have improved.

"Now we're seeing people tired of conserving. They want to spend money," Forester said.

Winery Association spokeswoman Jolaine Collins had noticed the "recession has worked to our benefit" in terms of seizing the customers looking for the mid-range wine purchases.

Pam Miller of Single Leaf has seen an upsurge in dollars spent per visit. Miller has not only witnessed more of the younger

set coming to the winery off Fairplay Road, but she's also seen those who make it to the winery wanting "to make the most of their trip," because of higher gas prices.

Most of the vintners are optimistic this coming Passport weekend's sunny weather in the forecast will bring out the enthusiasm among their customers. A sellout is anticipated – especially with the recent trends.

"We're finding the young consumers are very interested in wine, and they're coming for the intimate settings where they can learn about the wine," said Winery Association President Beth Jones, who works for Lava Cap. The north-end winery fared better during the storm Saturday and only lost power for seconds.

Jones insists El Dorado is being "discovered more" as a choice for wine up to Napa and Sonoma. Unlike the latter counties' national push, this county tends to focus its marketing efforts on the region.

The El Dorado Winery Association may be reached at 800.306.3956.