

El Dorado County wine sales increasing

By Kathryn Reed

PLACERVILLE – Based on the number of cases leaving wineries and headed for vehicles, wine sales in El Dorado County are doing well.

Granted, buyers could have been lured by last weekend being the first of two weekends of the annual Passport where there are some special deals going on that aren't seen the rest of the year. Still, winery officials told *Lake Tahoe News* that people are buying wine year-round.

The Wine Institute earlier this month said wine sales in the United States hit a record in 2012. The 360.1 million cases sold was an increase of 2 percent from 2011. The retail value of that wine was \$34.6 billion.



Guy Herriott of Fenton Herriott provides a sample of the 2010 Merlot. Photos/Kathryn Reed

California wineries sold 207.7 million cases – which accounts for 58 percent of the U.S. wine market.

“In the last six months there has been more of an uptick in

wine sales,” Justin Boeger with Boeger Winery in Placerville told *Lake Tahoe News*. His parents opened the winery in 1974.

The lower priced wines continue to be the better sellers Boeger said, admitting this is an indication the economy has not completely turned around. His philosophy is to charge an appropriate price – not inflate the value.

Boeger said he likes to shop in the \$20 bottle range so he tries to have many of the wines he sells be in that price point.

He is seeing a growth in Barbera sales.

“I think the Barbera grape is particularly situated to the foothills because of its natural acidity (in the soil),” Boeger said.

Fenton Herriott Vineyards has been seeing steady growth in its sales since opening in 2006.

Winemaker and owner Guy Herriott said one key to being successful is having a variety of wines for people to taste.

On this particular weekend he is pouring the 2009 Merlot from bottles and samples of the 2010 Merlot from barrels. This is not a varietal found in the foothills with regularity or one that is memorable. Fenton Herriott is proving Merlot and El Dorado County go together.

Herriott said with people forgetting the movie “Sideways” that dissed Merlot, the varietal is making a comeback.

To make sure his wines don’t sit in a warehouse, Steve Grace of Grace Patriot Wines recently hired two people who are savvy in social media and other marketing techniques that aren’t necessarily traditional for the wine industry.

Even so, the former plastic surgeon from Reno told *Lake Tahoe News*, “Direct sales are the best.” This means no middleman –

instead putting the wines in customers' hands as they leave the tasting room.

Their first vintage was 2004, with the tasting room opening in January 2011. As one of the newer wineries, Grace Patriot has not had to weather the farming and economic cycles like some of its neighbors.

Since the first crush in 2000, Aaron Hill – owner and winemaker at Illuminare – says sales have increased by the same percentage each year. The Petit Verdot is his best seller.

Illuminare produces almost 2,700 cases a year, with that number increasing a little each year.

Hill attributes the growth to having affordable wines, people choosing to take trips closer to home and wine tasting along the way, and people not wanting to give up wine no matter the economy.

At Jodar Vineyards, which has been bottling wine since 1990, the predominant change over the past few years is the age of the person visiting the winery. It's people over 40.

This is particularly evident with the Passport crowd, which in years past was full of twentysomethings who rented limos and acted more like they were out to get drunk than on an outing to discover a new wine for the cellar.

Last weekend for Passport it was less party atmosphere and more talk of the wines and food being paired at the various stations. It was about buying something for down the road and not how much could be consumed that day.

It was about wine sales.

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Notes:

- El Dorado County Passport Weekend continues April 20-21. Tickets and information are available online.
- Many of the winemakers praised the 2012 crop, saying what's in the bottles could be outstanding.

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