

Calif. vintners want Cubans to be wine drinkers

By Andrea Rodriguez, AP

The 3.5 million tourists who flooded Cuba last year downed oceans of mojitos, lakes of daiquiris and rivers of thin, sour beer. Only an odd few accompanied their ropa vieja and croquetas with wine – mostly overpriced, low- to mid-grade vintages from Chile, Argentina and Spain.

That may be about to change, at least around the margins of Cuba's once-dismal dining scene. Some of the United States' largest vintners want to turn this island of sweet rum and flat state-brewed beer into a haven for robust California zinfandel, oaky chardonnay and powerful cabernet sauvignon.

Thousands of private restaurants have cropped up around Cuba in recent years under economic reforms designed to soften the shock of cutbacks in the troubled state-controlled economy. Particularly on the high end, those restaurants' clients are increasingly American, part of a 76 percent surge in U.S. tourism – to 161,174 last year – that followed Presidents Raul Castro and Barack Obama's declaration of detente at the end of 2014.

Hoping to ride both trends, about 100 California wine producers, distributors and exporters descended on Havana this week for a two-day symposium to reintroduce Cuban restaurant owners and managers to their products.

The California Wine Symposium was organized by the California Wine Institute, associations of Napa and Sonoma valley wine producers and Sonoma-based U.S. Cava Exports, a 2-year-old company founded to export California agricultural products to Cuba. The event featured tastings, talks on California's vineyards and one-on-one meetings between U.S. business people

and Cuban restaurateurs and state officials.

“This is a spectacular meeting,” said Orlando Rodriguez, owner of Wao!!, a 3-year-old, 20-employee restaurant in Havana’s trendy Vedado neighborhood. “It arouses interest, which prompts business, which creates profits.”

Some 50 private restaurants, or paladares, and hundreds of sommeliers and buyers for state-run restaurants attended the conference, whose participants included representatives of the E&J Gallo and Francis Ford Coppola wineries.

It’s been legal for Cuba to buy wine and other agricultural products from the U.S. for years but Cuban officials say they stopped importing California wine in 2005 because the U.S. trade embargo prohibits American producers from selling agricultural goods to Cuba on credit. Obama allowed sales of most goods to Cuba on credit through executive action last week but lifting the ban on credit for farm products would require an act of Congress.

Cuba has never been a big wine-drinking country, but it imports some 360,000 cases of wine a year from countries that allow sales on credit.

Darius Anderson, head of U.S. Cava Exports, said he hopes to be shipping California wine to Cuba by the end of the year.

“We’re working on the shipping, we’re working on the financing, and we hope to have them all solved by mid-year, have two or three containers on the water and get them here by the holidays,” he said.

Only a small number of Cuban government agencies are allowed to import goods, creating a chokepoint of inefficiency and bureaucracy that makes it virtually impossible for private businesses to bring in large quantities of goods from other countries. Paladar owners depend on black-market goods, items bought at retail stores or supplies brought in the suitcases

of people paid to “mule” products from the U.S. and other countries. The lack of a legal wholesale market is widely seen as one of the main hindrances to the efficient development of private enterprise in Cuba.

“It doesn’t matter to me if a private person or the state does the importing. What matters is that there’s somewhere to buy this wine,” said Julio Valdes, a representative of the Five Corners Trattoria in Old Havana. “It’s important for us to have a variety for our clients. Right now we have Chilean, Italian and Spanish wine that we buy in stores bit by bit.”