

Growing the



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Grapes of Wealth

Chateau de Oklahoma?

That's what most Oklahomans are asking about the state's newest agricultural enterprise, viniferous grapes. That is, grapes that are good enough for making wine, right here in the state made famous by John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

How wonderfully, sweetly, ironic.

Dean McCraw, extension specialist in Oklahoma State University's Department of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture, doesn't think it is ironic at all. In fact, he has become aware of the growing passion for grapes and wine in Oklahoma in the past few years. He said the interest significantly increased with the passing of state legislation last year that allows Oklahoma wineries to sell their product directly to restaurants and retail liquor stores, bypassing the wholesale route. A few of the wines are already being featured in liquor stores.

The new interest is the reason McCraw currently teaches a Cooperative Extension course called "Oklahoma Grape Management." The course started in February and will end in October.

The objective of the course is to familiarize present and potential Oklahoma grape growers with grape management requirements throughout the growing season. Although he originally limited the class to 50 participants, the demand was so strong the class size was increased 50 percent to 75 participants. Even so, McCraw said, there are still a lot of people being left out.

"We are kind of trolling with the grape program right now," McCraw said. "The administration has committed to support the program for five years to see where these individuals will go with it."

McCraw said interest in growing grapes has been partly increased by farmers who are looking for an alterna-

tive crop, or even something that is more visually pleasing than Oklahoma's traditional cash crops. He said the backgrounds and intents of those taking the class are, however, "about as diverse as you could get."

Take Ralph Kremier, for example. A self-titled semi-retiree, he is looking for another source of income in addition to his cattle. Aware of the pricey setup cost per acre of a vineyard, his primary purpose in the class is to find out if grapes will grow well in the soil and microclimate where he lives, near Lucine, Okla.

"I think in Oklahoma most anyone can grow these grapes. It just depends with what quality," Kremier said.

The president of the Oklahoma Grape Growers and Winemakers Association, Bob McBratney of Haskell, Okla., said people who are interested should definitely "go into it with their eyes open."

"It behooves people to get a good educational background in this before they invest any amount of time, because it's really capital-intensive and labor-intensive," he said.

While it may appear that making wine for years got him the position of president of the Oklahoma Grape Growers and Wine Makers Association, the truth is that he retired just last year from his "real" career. He was a physician for 25 years, only hobbying in grapes and wine for the last three years before he officially launched his family business, Stone Bluff Cellars Inn, located 10 miles southeast of Bixby, Okla. Alongside the vineyard and the winery, the McBratneys also own and manage a bed and breakfast, formerly called Trinity Farms.

"We wanted something at the farm that would be interesting to [guests] while being economically viable at the same time," he said.

His wife, Sandy, and son, Brendan, keep up with the accounting and sales/marketing responsibilities, respectively. The workload, Bob McBratney has learned, is much heavier than he had originally expected. Although the work is somewhat seasonal on his three and one-half acre vineyard, as with any other type of agriculture, grapes require attention year-round. Maintaining trellises, pruning, spraying, shoot tying, cluster positioning and thinning, and pest monitoring are just a few of the chores, and then, of course, there's harvest.

Brendan McBratney, a 1998 graduate of the OSU College of Business, said he thinks everyone in Oklahoma's grape and wine industry knows about McCraw's class.

Bob McBratney, one of McCraw's students, seems to already know a lot about the business, as evidenced by the awards Stone Bluff Cellars has won. Stone Bluff's wines stand up to nationwide and international competition. In addition to winning two gold medals and the "Best in Oklahoma" award in the year 2000, they also received a silver medal in the Taster's Guild International Competition in August 2000.

They have had success with the Vignoles variety grape, which yields semi-sweet white wines. One Stone Bluff specialty, for example, is a light port or desert wine called Royale, which is made from Vignoles grapes and blackberries.

Stone Bluff produced about 1,500 gallons of wine last year, about one-fourth of the 6,000 total gallons produced across the state.

If that sounds like a lot, just hold your corks, because Oklahomans drank 11 million gallons of wine last year.

"The market potential is large," McCraw said. "Some producers will be successful, some won't. We try to

provide as much information as possible so they will be able to make educated decisions about it.”

The key role the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service has in this course, he said, is to help identify which varieties will be successful with Oklahoma’s microclimates and which cultural practices will ensure long-term growth in the industry.

“It will be an evolutionary industry,” he said. “Oklahoma grape growers and wine makers will evolve to meet the needs of the Oklahoma consumers.”

There may even be a niche market for some specialized regional wines that are commemorative of the state’s great history, he said.

As far as the money to be made in this business, McCraw said the grape program is a large investment and the risk is great, since the capital is focused in such a small area. A small hailstorm, he said, could ruin an entire year’s crop of grapes.

This depth of knowledge is not entirely McCraw’s responsibility to share with students in the course, however. He has a partner, Keith Striegler, who has the position parallel to McCraw at the University of Arkansas. McCraw and Striegler became acquainted during the time Striegler worked at OSU. Also involved in some parts of the class are Sharon von Broembsen and Phil Mulder, both from the OSU Department of Entomology and Plant Pathology.

As the newest extension course being taught by OSU, it may also be the most needed, according to OSU instructor of beverage education, Bob Kane.

“I am proud to see a 21st century industry in its infancy — Oklahoma wine making — striving to produce vinifera wines,” Kane said. “The challenges are great: forbidding soil, hot growing seasons and young vines.”

“The key element is the determination of the local wine makers to work within their limitations and not sacrifice the desired quality standards,” Kane said. “The Oklahoma restaurant industry will line up to buy our local products, once they meet the necessary quality standards with competitive pricing.”

Despite the uphill road ahead, many

are already reaping some of the rewards of growing grapes.

“There is a great deal of satisfaction that goes way beyond traditional agriculture,” McBratney said. “There is a lifestyle behind winemaking that is full of beauty and culture, and it goes back thousands of years.”

And for Oklahoma, this is just the beginning of a new story in agriculture. *Cj*

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Courtesy of Iulisa World



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