

From the Tuscan sun to Oklahoma's red dirt  
by Amber Harrell-Simmons

As the early August sun rises above the horizon, the sunlight falls on sleepy-eyed workers disbursed down the rows of the vineyard. The workers have no complaints about the early mornings because the air is cool and the breeze is pleasant. Their fingers work automatically to pick the grapes from the dew-soaked vines. Soon these grapes will take a new form: wine.

This scene may remind you of California or maybe even Italy, but it is a scene visible across Oklahoma. Several years ago, vineyards and wineries began popping up throughout the state. Today, the Oklahoma wine industry is "running over" with success, and the Oklahoma State University Food and Agricultural Products Center is doing its part to help the industry continue to grow.

FAPC is dedicated to helping Oklahoma's producers, wine or otherwise, provide the highest quality products possible to consumers everywhere.

"In general terms, our mission is to assist value-added agricultural product processing in the state," said William McGlynn, FAPC's horticultural product processing specialist. "The wine industry fits that general mission very, very well."

McGlynn, in cooperation with the Oklahoma Grape Growers and Wine Makers Association, has developed a series of workshops to benefit grape growers in Oklahoma. The first in the series was a winery sanitation workshop. The focus of the workshop was the connection between proper winery sanitation and the quality of wine that is produced.

The center also is planning to offer a workshop on basic wine quality analysis. As the industry and FAPC continue to expand, more workshops will be developed to supplement the first two workshops.

Bob McBratney of Stone Bluff Cellars took part in the winery sanitation workshop. McBratney anticipates participating in future advanced workshops.

"As time goes on, we will need their expertise to keep up with advancement in the industry," said McBratney.

In addition to FAPC workshops, OSU hosts other programs to benefit current and potential grape and wine producers. The grape management class, which meets once a month from March through October, takes an individual through an entire production year and teaches the best practices to use when growing grapes and processing wine.

This program teaches which varieties of grapes have the most success in Oklahoma. FAPC and the OSU Department of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture have combined their efforts to research the varieties of grapes that will thrive in Oklahoma.

This research began nearly five years ago with experimental vineyards located near Stillwater, Okla. A local vineyard and winery, Woodland Park Winery, is growing 10 varieties of grapes for OSU's research through a grant with the Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture. OSU's research station near Perkins, Okla., has an additional 30 varieties growing on one acre. This research is to determine the best varieties for Oklahoma, as well as the best quality, productivity and disease resistance, said Jeanette Hane of Woodland Park Winery.

The next step in OSU's research will be processing the grapes and continuing the evaluation with the final product.

"We'll know the quality of the grapes coming out of the vineyard, and we'll know the quality of the wine that can be made from these grapes," said McGlynn. "We will also be able to conduct research to determine the best wine-making techniques that we can apply [to the grapes] to get the highest quality at the end of the day."

FAPC currently has the capabilities to provide general analytical services, such as tests for volatile acidity and alcohol content. The center also has the facilities for sensory tasting.

However, with the expansion of the wine and grape industry, FAPC is expanding, too. The lab soon will have the necessary equipment to make wine. The final steps to complete the lab are in progress, and McGlynn said he anticipates the lab will be completed by next season.

Once complete, the lab will have the capability of processing wine from start to finish. With the addition of this equipment, FAPC will be able to expand its educational and research capacities significantly, said McGlynn.

Hane and her husband, Ivol, own Woodland Park Winery in Stillwater, and have been a part of the many programs the center has to offer. The Hanes began growing grapes five years ago and recently have opened the doors of their winery. She calls it a "tremendous venture" for her and her husband.

Hane said she blames the lack of wineries and vineyards in the Midwestern states on prohibition during the 1920s.

"Prohibition stalled the industry in Missouri, Arkansas and Oklahoma, and it has taken this long for it to be revived," said Hane.

She said her new business has benefited greatly from FAPC's services and the winery will benefit from the center's expanding services. The Hanes truly are grateful to the extension efforts of the center and other departments.

"The center benefits all growers," said Hane. "Until now, not a lot of information was available, and we would have to sponsor our own classes in this area."

Another beneficial service the center has developed is a winery feasibility template for current and potential wine makers. Rodney Holcomb, FAPC's agribusiness economic specialist, focuses on the "dollars and cents" of business and has developed templates for use by Oklahoma processors.

"This is a template that we thought had the most potential for Oklahoma, just because we've had so many wineries popping up and so many people calling to request information on how to start a winery," said Holcomb.

The template is a spreadsheet that takes into account anything you could experience when entering into the wine-making business. The template determines the economic viability of becoming a wine maker. With this template, you have eight choices of wine you can choose to produce. It also is set up to manage blended wines.

In the spreadsheet, you input prices for materials, labor, equipment, etc. The spreadsheet determines cash flow, profit and loss, depreciation, net present value and internal rate of return for a 10-year period, all while taking the inflation rate into consideration.

The winery-feasibility spreadsheet will account for revenues from gift shop sales or from wine-tasting events. Holcomb said the template was designed to be user-friendly by color coding the cells to make plugging in the numbers simple.

"If you're looking at starting a winery, you can take this and, given the assumptions that you have, you can plug in the numbers in each color-coded cell," said Holcomb. "When it's all done, the spreadsheet will provide you with a rough estimate of profit and loss, as well as cash flow, and tell you whether or not this is a good business investment."

FAPC is committed to identifying ways to add value to Oklahoma products and is a great resource to agricultural producers and processors, said J. Roy Escoubas, director of FAPC.

With more than 30 wineries in the state, Oklahoma's grape growing and wine making industry will continue to grow and impact the economy on different levels.

"There is an art and a science to wine making," said McGlynn. "To be successful, you must master both the art and the science."

*For information on the OSU Food and Agricultural Products Center or to view the winery feasibility template, visit <http://www.fapc.biz> or call (405) 744-6071.*

Ivol Hane, owner and wine maker at Woodland Park Winery, prepares to prune the vineyard's 7.5 acres of grapevines after its first year in production. (photos by Amber Harrell-Simmons)