

(Back to) The Future of Wineries  
*Number 60 in a series of opinionated articles about grapes and wine*  
by John L. Smith

News Item, *Mountain Democrat*, June 23, 2012 — “Today, the last family in Fair Play without a winery filed for a permit to build ‘a small, artisanal boutique winery, featuring hand-crafted vintages that allow the true nature of the grapes to show through in every batch.’ Chuck Charbono, the last holdout in the area, said ‘We never expected to have a winery, but it became a dream after I won a Bronze Medal in the State Fair Home Winemaking competition last year.’”

Interviews with Chuck’s neighbors indicated that earlier, when they couldn’t swallow his home-made wines, they had to stop pouring them into the potted plants because the plants were all dying. “Chuck never had any real training in winemaking, but he was able to cook up some other things a few years back, so we knew he had the talent,” stated one neighbor, “and while he’s not really experienced at growing grapes, he did raise the rhubarb that he made his bronze-medal-winning wine from.” Another added, “He’s just a regular guy who made one batch of wine that he somehow managed not to mess up, so he finally felt the need to have his own winery like everyone else in town.”

The Fair Play American Viticultural Area, established in 2001, will now have the distinction of having a winery on every parcel in the district, outpacing the Shenandoah Valley to the south, where it is thought that seven parcels are still without wineries. The El Dorado County Winery Ordinance, which was revised again in 2010 after some 147 amendments, recognized the right of every citizen in the county to own a winery. Said Agricultural Commissioner Muscat Canelli “At first, there was an unreasonable request by the “industry” (those who already had wineries) that anyone opening a winery needed to have five acres of grapes. We recognized belatedly that since many parcels are only five acres in total, it would be a hardship for anyone to cover the entire parcel with vines and still have room for a 5,000 square foot house and a production facility.” After the requirement was reduced in the 2009 version of the ordinance to just 100 vines on the property, landowners with even smaller parcels mounted an organized appeal to the Board of Supervisors, and the number of vines required to open a winery was reduced from 100 to just one by the swing vote of newly-elected District II Supervisor Lettom Havvit. Their rallying cry was an echo of the famous Second-Amendment-supporting stump speech by former Senator Phil Graham of Texas: “We have more wineries than we NEED, but fewer wineries than we WANT!”

The relaxed requirements brought about a building boom, and another 393 wineries were added to the list the following year. Coincidentally, the county’s continuing budget crisis was alleviated by the almost \$10 million income from the South County building permit fees. “We realized that when the wineries were so close together, visitors would have shorter distances to drive, but there would still be lots of traffic. The nice feature is that there is now only one wine taster for each 50 wineries, not like the old days where three or four people would be crowded into a single tasting room,” said county D.O.T. Director Dusty Rhodes. Financial analysis of the wineries has revealed that although the average income of each winery was only \$237 during fiscal year 2011, the aggregate amount of wine sales continued to increase for the 30th year in a row.

A valuable addition to the greater Fair Play area was the cavernous Vintners' Hall, completed last year on the site of the former Fair Play Hardware Store and across the street from the Old Bistro Ice-Cream and Tattoo Parlor. It has facilities to allow all 4,173 winery owners to attend monthly meetings of the Winery Association. Said Winus Apleinty, current association president, "We used to have trouble getting along since we were all competing with each other, and we would all have hidden agendas about how best to take away each others' customers. But as the number of "gentlemen farmers" continued to increase, we realized we're all in the same boat, and there's really no other way to make a living up here, so now we come together the first Monday of each month to cooperate in bringing more Sacramento visitors to our wonderful area. Then we sing 'Kum-bay-yah' and we each go back to our winery."

Also gone are the days when residents would object to having a winery next door. "After all, since we all have a winery next door, there's no one left to complain about the dust, the noise and the traffic," said one of the previous holdouts, transplanted Frenchman Merle Eau. Merle completed his facility in 2010 to process the exquisite wine produced from the ten zinfandel vines on his 0.1-acre homestead in the exclusive gated Crystal Caves subdivision, and went on: "Just next year, I expect to have as many as 50 bottles of wine to sell, depending on how many the family drinks before then. I see this as the ultimate culmination of winemaking artistry — getting back to nature while participating in the innovative movement toward wineries in the area." When asked if he was concerned about the difficulty several new vintners had expressed about selling their wine, he said "If they don't buy it, we'll just have that much more to drink. And I've already impressed all my friends back in France with my creativity in actually opening a winery. Besides, my wines are so exclusive that I'm only planning to be open Tuesday afternoon from 2:00 to 2:30 by appointment. Screaming Eagle Winery started this way, and their wines now sell for \$1,000 per bottle."

The dominance of grapes in the county caused the Board of Supervisors to repeal the old Oak-Tree Ordinance and replace it with a Grape-Vine Ordinance. "If anyone pulls out a grape vine in this county," said Supervisor Havitt, they'll either have to plant two new ones, or make a contribution to the L. H. Substitute Mitigation Bank of \$1,000 per vine removed. We just can't have our common livelihood ripped out willy-nilly to allow the building of second homes." And since all properties now have vines on them and are zoned agricultural, no one has to mess with those bothersome setback requirements that used to be required for land adjacent to ag zoning.

Last Monday, the Winery Association held their meeting and moved in favor of a major advance in Fair Play wine tasting. Since every parcel now has a winery, they voted to construct an aerial tram network to allow visitors to travel from one winery to the next. That way there would be no driving and no traffic on the roads, and the trams would have convenient case-goods lockers so visitors could buy all the wine they want. And for the convenience of the customers, the trams would connect with light rail in Sacramento to the west, and with the chair lifts at Kirkwood to the east. The vintners, enormously pleased with their vision and progress, sang "Kum-bay-yah" and went home.

