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El Dorado Grapes Travel Well

El Dorado grapes capturing attention of notable winemakers around the state

Placerville, CA – As the 2014 harvest begins this month, El Dorado-grown wine grapes are capturing the attention of both large-scale wineries and small artisan producers outside the area. Thanks to dramatic elevation changes, unique soils, distinct microclimates and its diverse selection of grape varieties, El Dorado is establishing its identity as a world-class growing region. The county has more than 2,000 acres of grapevines at elevations ranging from about 1,000 to 3,500 feet and is home to nearly 70 wineries.

With several vineyards already picking fruit this week, El Dorado growers are excited to see their grapes gaining more and more notoriety. Nearly half of El Dorado's wine grapes leave the area to be made into wines made in nearby Amador, Napa, Sonoma and Yolo counties. According to the county's grape reports, Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Merlot and Petite Sirah are the most highly sought after grapes.

Family owned and operated Bogle Vineyards is a large case production operation that recognizes the diversity of the state by sourcing grapes from several AVAs. They bring in nearly 500 tons of grapes from El Dorado to their winery, which is located south of Sacramento in Clarksburg. Local grower Ron Mansfield helps Bogle source grapes from several growers in the region, mainly Merlot, Syrah, Petite Sirah and Cabernet Sauvignon. Bogle credits the area's diverse topography and rocky soils for its quality fruit. "It's a very good relationship" Mansfield says, "that benefits both Bogle and the El Dorado grape growers."

"There is also a lot of interest and demand for the less usual grape varieties from wineries outside the county" says Elizabeth Standeven, president of the El Dorado Wine Grape Growers Association. "Our mountain setting offers winemakers a unique and vast selection to choose from; we grow more than 45 different grape varieties here."

Dirty and Rowdy, a North Coast-based winery, sources grapes from around the state, including vineyards in El Dorado. Co-owner and winemaker Hardy Wallace describes the soil as "incredible, unique and unlike any of the other regions we're using." Wallace says "There's this pioneering attitude in El Dorado. Growers are still in discovery mode and there are really cool plantings of super interesting varieties."

Mansfield, who owns Goldbud Farms and sells grapes to several distant wineries, has been growing fruit in the region since 1980. After initially planting two acres to eight varieties, he was convinced to focus on Syrah and other Rhône varieties by Steve Edmunds (of Berkeley-based Edmunds St. John), who started sourcing grapes from El Dorado in the late 1980s. This progression continues today with a mini revolution of Rhône-loving winemakers finding the rocky soils and higher elevations ideal for grape growing.

Jared and Tracey Brandt, co-owners/winemakers at Donkey & Goat (another Berkeley-based winery) came to the area in search of Syrah in 2003 and today more than half of their 6,000 case production is from El Dorado. Tracey Brandt says, "we fell in love with the terroir for our Syrah." Over the years Mansfield has planted and grafted many Rhône varietals for the Brandts and today they have 11 of the 22 Rhone varieties including many of the lesser known like Counoise, Cinsault, Picpoul and Clairette, which is one of two known plantings in California. "There is still a wild west spirit in El Dorado which resonates with us" says Jared.

A rising star in the wine world, Helen Keplinger looks to El Dorado as the source for her Caldera blend – Mourvèdre, Grenache and Counoise - from a sixteen-year old, head-trained vineyard. Speaking about the increased attention coming to the region, Keplinger notes, "Hopefully the majority of winemakers will see it as an opportunity, not just to raise the profile but to also to continue to raise the bar."

Teena Hildebrand, president of the El Dorado Winery Association and co-owner of Narrow Gate Vineyards, is excited about wines from El Dorado, regardless of where they are made, "The fact that so many winemakers are searching us out is a testament to our quality. It's validating to those of us who came here in search of a magical wine region and now call it home."

The future looks bright for El Dorado. Standeven is optimistic, stating, "With each year, we're gaining notoriety for our wines and as we continue to refine our vineyard practices, our reputation and reach will only get stronger." The El Dorado AVA will continue to add a valuable piece to California's winegrowing industry with its unique soils and microclimates, one-of-a-kind mountain locations, and ability to grow a diverse selection of varieties.

About El Dorado Winery Association

El Dorado's wineries offer visitors a wide diversity of award winning wines, friendly tasting room staffs, and spectacular views of hillside vineyards, snow-capped mountains and oak-studded foothills. Located in Gold Country, just an hour from Sacramento or South Lake Tahoe, El Dorado wineries are renowned for making vibrant, distinct, delicious wines, grown in the dramatic elevations of the Sierra Nevada. For more information, visit www.eldoradowines.org or contact Joel Peterson at Solterra Strategies, 805-610-2204 or Joel (at) solterrastrategies.com

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