

Wines of El Dorado Earning a Reputation

By Roger and Colleen Stockton, "The Wine Couple"

Once a small but booming industry around the turn of the century, El Dorado wine had essentially disappeared following prohibition and the end of the gold era. Growers re-discovered this region located at the ascent of the foothills in the 1970's and El Dorado County is once again finding itself noted for it's many wines. The reason is simple. Area winemakers, consumed with a spirit of experimentation are learning which varieties grow best in each vineyard much like the French have done over the last several hundred years. El Dorado's climate has been compared to the Northern Rhone valley of France. Sloped vineyards and widely fluctuating daily temperatures due to the high elevation help the grapes reach ideal physiological maturity resulting in great wine. These intrepid explorers have also learned to keep crop levels down concentrating flavors and coaxing the maximum richness out of each grape. The soils of El Dorado vary dramatically and range from volcanic ash to nearly solid granite that must be blasted with dynamite before vines can be planted. What once was has now come full circle.

At a time when grape prices have been dropping throughout the state, the price per ton of grapes in El Dorado County have remained relatively steady. Others have seen the popularity of the Sierra Foothills and are purchasing El Dorado fruit for their own use. One major California winery has begun using the name Sierra on one of their lines, exploiting the popularity of the region as a marketing tool. While this practice may be legal, the grapes used in these wines are not from the Sierra Foothills and may lack the complexity and enjoyment of the real thing, much like gluing a Cadillac emblem on a Yugo.

The rich and robust zinfandel the area is known for is now sharing the spotlight with several European varietals. As you wind your way into many of these wineries the lush green gardens and grounds will brighten your soul even before you take your first sip. On a recent trip we tasted many wines that have found their place and many others that will continue to evolve. The zinfandel, syrah, barbara and sangiovese were wonderfully structured, with spicy red berry and cherry fruit flavors with underlying notes of minerals indigenous to the region's soil. The sauvignon blanc, pinot gris and marsanne offered good acidity, fruit and floral tones redolent of a citrus grove in the spring. (Danger: Addictively delicious!)

The wineries are spread throughout the county with friendly tasting rooms and complimentary wine tastes. In total, there are of over 20 family wineries that make up the El Dorado Winery Association. A short drive over the hill will find you in wine lover's paradise and we have no doubt that after your visit, you will be singing the praises of El Dorado After a few glasses, you may be singing a few old miners' songs too. For more information and maps, visit www.eldoradowines.org.

Our picks of the month:

Sierra Vista Vineyards, 2001 Fleur de Montagne;

A Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape style blend of grenache, syrah, mourvedre and cinsault. Aromas of ripe cherry and berry accented with spring flowers. Velvety mouth feel with an incredible finish (\$21)

Boeger, 2000 El Dorado Zinfandel;

Blackberry, cherry and spice dominate the nose with good tannin structure and balance for a lingering finish (\$15)

Charles B. Mitchell 2002 Estate Sauvignon Blanc; Wonderfully balanced with nuances of clover, herb and a hint of oak leading to crisp a taste of grapefruit and citrus that goes on and on. (\$12)