



Features

[Frontpage](#)

[News](#)

[Opinion](#)

[Sports](#)

· [Ski Tahoe](#)

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[Archives](#)

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[Tahoe World](#)

April 7, 2003

Winery business improving with age in El Dorado County

[By Kathryn Reed, Tahoe Daily Tribune](#)

Quality, not quantity, is what makes a wine region profitable. El Dorado County grapes are all about quality.

While the price per ton dropped 12 percent throughout California, El Dorado grapes saw a decrease of 0.8 percent.

Local growers received \$1,199 per ton in 2002 compared to \$1,209 in 2001. Napa is the highest-priced area of the 17 wine districts in the state. Napa zinfandel grapes fetched \$1,900 per ton, while the foothills -- an area from Nevada County to Mariposa County -- garnered \$980 per ton for the same varietal.

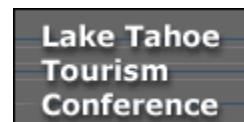
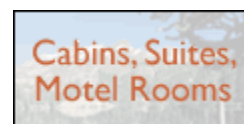
These figures were released this month in the 2002 El Dorado County Wine Grape Survey which is put out by the state Department of Agriculture.

"I am impressed with one thing and that is that the reputation of our grapes and wines have become such that the price per ton is not slipping like it is statewide," said Vaughn Jodar, president of El Dorado Winery Association.

Quality is evident by the number of awards area wineries are accumulating. With less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the number of cases produced a year in California, El Dorado County is raking in 10 percent of the gold medals.

About 175,000 cases of wine were bottled in the county last year. Gallo produces about 2.5 million cases a year.

"The point is that our impact on our industry has nothing to do with quantity, but it does with quality," Jodar said.





There was a time when pears dominated the agricultural landscape of the county. Now wine grapes are taking root. An additional 383 acres were planted last year, increasing the acreage by 22 percent from 2001.

Of the 2,127 acres planted in the county, 663 of them are not bearing fruit.

It takes an average of four seasons before a vineyard can be harvested, according to Dave Pratt, vice president of El Dorado Wine Grape Growers Association.

Because nearly one-third of the vines in El Dorado County are non-producing, the amount of grapes will increase dramatically in the coming years.

"I think it's good. I also think it challenges us," Pratt said.

To make a home for all of these grapes, Pratt said El Dorado County growers are banking on the quality.

"From a grape grower's perspective, there is 28 percent sold to wineries outside the county," said Pratt, who owns Pratt Vineyards in Fairplay. "It is because people are looking to buy grapes from a quality growing region."

There are 210 growers in the county and 31 wineries.

Those growers produced 4,060 tons of grapes in 2002 -- an increase of 14 percent from 2001. The value hit a record last year at \$4.68 million -- an increase of 8 percent from 2001.

Even though there are reports of an overabundance of California grapes, El Dorado officials remain optimistic.

"It's not so much a glut of wine, but a decrease of buying in 2002," said Jodar, who owns Jodar Vineyard and Winery in the Apple Hill area.

He attributes this to consumer confidence being low, the 1998 vintage that was released in 2002 being below par in Northern California, and 9-11 affecting the travel and vacation industry.

Even though wine is not flying off store shelves, local wineries are seeing their tasting rooms full of people.

"One reason the tasting rooms are doing so well is that instead of flying to Tucson to play golf for three days, people are coming up Highway 50 to see you and me," Jodar said.

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 [TOP OF
PAGE](#)

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