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These grapes will be harvested near July 4th



Messina Hof expects 25,000 gallons of wine this year

Texas wines improving every year

By CATHY RIELY

Staff Writer

Texas wines. The words evoke various images: underage high-school students getting drunk on jugs of cheap wine bought at local convenience stores; a few small-time vineyards selling and producing an insignificant amount of wine a year; a joke — in Texas and elsewhere. None of these speculations are complimentary, or as it turns out, accurate.

In actuality, 14 wineries are spread across Texas, from Lubbock to Del Rio. State wine production ranks 14th in the United States and is rising rapidly every year. And Texas wines have won awards in both national and international contests.

Locally, Messina Hof Winery is representative of the up-and-

coming wine industry in Texas. Paul and Merrill Bonarrigo planted every vine of the original one-fourth acre test plot in 1977. Bonded in 1983, the winery has increased its production from 6,000 to 16,000 gallons per year, and has plans to "be in the 60,000-gallon range, probably within three years."

Though the winery is new, the Bonarrigos already have made a name for themselves. Since September of 1984, Messina Hof has won 11 awards, seven in the state and four from national and international wine contests in Dallas and New York.

Messina Hof is one of Texas' youngest wineries. The oldest winery still producing dates back over 100 years. Val Verde Winery in Del Rio celebrated its centennial anniversary in the fall of 1983. The winery has re-

mained in the Qualia family throughout the years.

Texas probably had 45 wineries before Prohibition, Bonarrigo says. Most of the wineries folded because of Prohibition.

"They (the Qualias) survived Prohibition by selling wines to churches," Mrs. Bonarrigo says.

But winemaking in Texas dates back further than the Val Verde Winery; the roots go back well over two centuries. When Texas was still a part of Mexico, vineyards were established and wine was produced in Paras, Coahuila (1593), and Delicia, Coahuila (1606). In 1662, Franciscan priests from Mexico carried vines into the El Paso Valley and established the Ysleta Mission. So Texas had wine a full century before another Franciscan priest planted the first vines in San Diego, in what has be-

come the California wine industry.

Texas' contribution to the wine industry is even more significant, thanks to legendary botanist and viticulturist Thomas Volney Munson.

In the mid 1840's, a fungus parasite infected vineyards in England, France, Italy, and throughout Europe. Europeans imported American rootstocks resistant to the fungus, but the vines shipped carried the root louse phylloxera. (The louse destroys the root system of vines and causes them to die). The phylloxera spread throughout Europe, destroying more than six million acres in grapevines.

This is when Munson, and Texas, came to the rescue. Munson sent new rootstock to Europe where famous grape varieties were grafted onto the Texas roots. Munson and his

colleague, Hermann Jaeger, were awarded the French Legion of Honor Cross of Merite Agricole in 1888. The only two Americans so honored, Munson and Jaeger are still considered saviors of France's wine industry.

So to this day, vines in Bordeaux and Burgundy are of the same lineal rootstock as those throughout Texas.

Though the wine industry in Texas goes back a long way, it wasn't until 1976 that "the new era in Texas wine began." Bonarrigo says that this is because Texas is a fairly young wine-drinking state.

"One of the big reasons for this, is that until 1971 liquor-by-the-drink was not legalized in the state of Texas," Bonarrigo says. "That slowed the process

see page 12