



Suisun Valley prepares to grow wine business

By Judy Jacobs

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While few people realize that Fairfield has a wine region, the grape growers of Suisun Valley, where vineyards were first established more than a century ago, are determined to grow the region's identity, increase the number of wineries located there and produce higher-value wines. And they're counting on the efforts of the Suisun Valley Grape Growers Association and the Solano County General Plan's update, currently under way, to help them achieve their goals.

The number of wineries claiming the Suisun Valley AVA (American Viticulture Appellation), is growing for the small region, which measures three by eight miles and extends into the Fairfield city limits. In order to be a Suisun Valley wine, "85 percent of the fruit has to come from the area," said Roger King, president of the Suisun Valley Grape Growers Association.

"Five years ago, only three wineries had a Suisun Valley label. Now there are 22 wine labels that are Suisun Valley." The area encompasses 15,000 acres, with 3,000 acres under vines.

Because the area is not as well known as Napa and Sonoma, its grapes fetch lower prices. "Napa gets \$5,000 per ton, here it's just \$2,000," King said.

Along with the growth in Suisun Valley wine labels has been a growth in wineries.

"We were grape growers, but one of our strategies was to grow more wineries, and that's been a pretty big accomplishment. We now have six wineries," King said. These include Wooden Valley Winery & Vineyards, Ledgewood Creek Winery, Mankas Hills Vineyards and Vezer Family Vineyard.

The development of these wineries has been a longtime effort and partly the result of the attempt to keep Suisun Valley rural. In the early 1970s the city

of Fairfield had wanted to annex Suisun Valley, but the Solano Irrigation District, which supplies water to Suisun Valley farms, opposed annexation and filed a lawsuit.

"In 1974, the city of Fairfield and the district agreed not to deliver potable water to Suisun Valley (from 1974 to 2006)," said Rick Wood, Fairfield's assistant director of public works/utilities. "It was intended to help Suisun Valley remain agricultural." The settlement allowed the city to build a pipeline across Suisun Valley and a reservoir, creating a water supply that encouraged Anheuser Busch Cos. to establish a bottling plant in Fairfield. At the same time, the city dropped its intention to urbanize Suisun Valley, Wood said.

In 2002, the city and the SID amended the agreement and extended it to Dec. 31, 2010. They also agreed to create the Suisun Valley Fund, with each entity contributing \$100,000 a year between 2003 and 2010. The fund is governed by the Suisun Valley Fund Advisory Committee made up of two members from the Fairfield City Council, two members from the SID and two landowners who are actively engaged in agriculture. The money is to be spent on programs to preserve and enhance agriculture in Suisun Valley.

One of the funding beneficiaries is the Suisun Valley Grape Growers Association.

"In 2003 we called a meeting of the growers and invited 40 growers. Thirty showed up to talk about what to do with the money. We decided to form an association. We knew we had to promote this appellation," said King. "We're 100 percent focused on sales and marketing of grapes using wine to help achieve that goal."

One of the ways to increase the economic impact of the grape-growing business is to make more wine locally.

SUISUN VALLEY GRAPE GROWERS ASSOCIATION[™]



"Only 3 to 5 percent of the grapes that are crushed here are used for Suisun Valley wines," said Ron Lanza, vice president of Wooden Valley Winery & Vineyards, which was established by his grandfather in 1955. "The Lanza family only uses 10 percent of the grapes we grow. We would like to go in the other direction. Eldorado County is an 80 percent end user, but they have about 20 wineries."

What does the grape drain mean economically? With about 96 percent of the grape output leaving Solano County, the loss would be between about \$50 million and \$170 million a year based on retail prices, depending on the class of wine, according to King. And that doesn't include sales tax and jobs. Based on wholesale prices, the loss would be between about \$33 million and \$114 million.

One way to help alleviate the grape drain is to attract more winemakers. And a way to attract more winemakers is to change the agricultural zoning in Suisun Valley from the current minimum 40-acre parcels to 20-acre parcels, something that both the Suisun Valley Fund Advisory Committee and the grape growers association have proposed be incorporated into the General Plan update.

The county expects to complete the draft of the General Plan by March, with public hearings in May and hearings before the Solano County Board of Supervisors in July. Some elements will have to go before the voters at a yet-to-be-determined election date after that.

Meanwhile, another major goal, which is expected to be achieved with the addition of more wineries, is to make Suisun Valley a tourist destination.

"There are tours and tastings at Jelly Belly, Budweiser ... a couple of chocolate rooms have tasting rooms. There are olive oil tasting rooms. Fairfield can position itself as a winery town, if it so pleased," said King.