

As seen in... The Sacramento Bee

Suisun Valley ready to make its mark in winery circles

November 5, 2003

Section: TASTE

Page: F9

By Mike Dunne

Bee Food Editor

DUNNE ON WINE; Sidebar also on page F9.

—One moment you're zipping along Interstate 80, approaching Fairfield, almost halfway between Sacramento and San Francisco.

Out the windows, about all you see are gas stations, fast-food joints, the massive hulk of the Budweiser brewery and an occasional cargo jet lumbering into Travis Air Force Base.

But within minutes, you can be tooling along a narrow country road lined with stately churches, produce stands and vineyards. Without fanfare, you've entered Suisun Valley, a historic but underappreciated California wine region, now eager to claim its place on the dinner table and in the minds of people who like to tour tasting rooms.

There are only two tasting rooms now, but the area's grape growers and winemakers are working industriously to raise public awareness of this pastoral enclave at the southern reaches of the more celebrated Napa Valley.

The climate is similar, the soils are similar, and for years Napa Valley vintners have been buying Suisun Valley grapes and blending them into their wines, so several of the valley's 44 growers reason, why shouldn't Suisun's farmers reach for a bit of that glory for themselves.

Toward that end, they formed the **Suisun Valley Grape Growers Association** this summer and now are pondering how they can let wine enthusiasts know about Suisun Valley.

"We all know that grapes from this valley are sitting on store shelves under the Napa label," says Ron Lanza, one of four brothers who with their father, Richard, own Suisun Valley's landmark Wooden Valley Winery and Vineyards.

(OK, so if it's in Suisun Valley, why is the winery named after Wooden Valley, just to the north? When the winery was founded in 1932, the road out front, now Suisun Valley Road, was named Wooden Valley Road.)

Suisun Valley has been an official American viticultural area since 1982, gaining the recognition just a year after Napa Valley. About 6 miles long and 2 miles wide at the widest, it encompasses about 15,000 acres, approximately 3,000 of which are used to grow grapes.

Though wineries periodically have flourished in the valley since at least the late 1800s, they haven't been numerous or particularly interested in developing a following beyond the immediate area. Even today, Wooden Valley Winery sells 90 percent of the 15,000 cases it produces annually right out of its tasting room.

Historically, pears have been the valley's principal crop, but they're declining, though tree branches from one pear orchard still brush the walls of Wooden Valley Winery.

Plantings of wine grapes in Suisun Valley expanded steadily during the past 20 years and surged especially during the 1990s, as they did in the state's other agricultural districts.

Large corporate wineries in Napa and Sonoma wanted grapes for the three hottest varieties - cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay and merlot - and that's what Suisun's growers tended to plant.

Now California's wine trade is saddled with an oversupply of grapes, especially those varieties, so Suisun Valley farmers are re-evaluating their vineyards and in some instances converting to varieties that may be more suitable for the local climate and soils.

"Just about every variety you can think of is being grown here now," says Roger King, president of the **Suisun Valley Grape Growers Association** and owner of Ledgewood Vineyards.

The oversupply of fruit and a subsequent dip in demand for Suisun Valley grapes by large wineries also is behind the drive by Suisun Valley farmers to raise the area's profile as a wine region.

Toward that end, they're encouraging vintners who buy their fruit to note on their labels that the grapes are from Suisun Valley, and their appeal is having some success as "Suisun Valley" appears on more bottles arriving at restaurants and stores.

"We need to change our image from being a supplier (of grapes to others) to being a producer (of wines)," says Ron Lanza. "We need to get that name 'Suisun Valley' out there."

Small specialty vintners from outside the area, such as Sunset Cellars of Alameda, Thomas Michael Cellars of Napa and Olabisi Wines of Calistoga, have started to release varieties such as petite sirah, zinfandel and syrah with a Suisun Valley appellation.

Local growers also are hoping to see more wineries build in the valley, but so far just one other producer, Ledgewood Creek Winery & Vineyards, has opened.

The Lanza family, however, plans to break ground next spring for a winery that will more than double its production capacity to 40,000 cases a year. It will be just up Suisun Valley Road from its existing winery, and when the relocation is completed the operation will be renamed Lanza Family Vineyards.

Because Suisun Valley is largely unrecognized as a fine-wine region, its wines tend to be modestly priced, which Lanza, King and others figure will give them an edge in today's market.

“This is the intersection of quality and value,” says Douglas Sparks of Sunset Cellars. “The quality here is improving fast, but we still offer value.” His Suisun Valley wines are priced around \$15, while Wooden Valley’s generally are under \$10 and Ledgewood Creek Winery’s are in the \$12 to \$15 range.

As a measure of vintner confidence in the area’s fruit, however, Olabisi Wines is releasing a meaty and lush syrah for \$30 and a novel unoaked petite sirah for \$35, both of which carry the Suisun Valley appellation.

“This is just like the Seabiscuit story,” says Olabisi’s Sonny Thielbar. “We’re the little winemakers that could. People want to believe it can happen, and it will.”

111

The Bee’s Mike Dunne can be reached at (916) 321-1143 or mdunne@sacbee.com.

All content © The Sacramento Bee and may not be republished without permission.

Send comments or questions to [NewsLibrary](#)

Visit www.sacbee.com for an original copy of this article.