



Suisun wines may die on the vine

Outdated laws: roadblocks to wineries' success

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If vintners in Suisun Valley lived in a perfect world, folks from Solano County and elsewhere would bypass Napa Valley in their quest for wines.

Rather, they would make a trip to local tasting rooms and vineyards.

But because of the county's outdated General Plan, with complicated zoning and permit requirements, some fear the Suisun Valley winemaking enterprises may die on the vine.

One of the biggest obstacles in their way is Solano County's prohibition against selling wines on-site, in tasting rooms. Unless all the grapes are grown on the property and processed there, a vintner is not allowed to sell the wine there. Also in the way are the county's requirements of special use permits for hosting events such as weddings and other activities.

The growers' requests for relief aren't falling on deaf ears. The Solano County Board of Supervisors is in the process of updating the county's General Plan, which is to shape land use for at least the next 20 years. As part of the update, the supervisors have been paying special attention to agriculture zoning and use.

At a recent meeting, the supervisors asked for specific lists of such restrictions.

Assisting with the General Plan Update is the Citizens Advisory Committee, members of which have been appointed by the supervisors.

Larry Clement, who chairs the committee's agriculture subcommittee, is studying ways to allow agriculture in Solano County to flourish. He said because processing grapes is expensive, Solano should adopt rules similar to those in Napa and other counties. He said there, wineries use grapes from neighboring vineyards in their wines and pay for processing done at other locations.

He said once this is done, Suisun Valley will create a name for itself.



Ron Lanza, left, vice president of the Suisun Valley Grape Growers Association, and Roger King, president, at the Lanza family's Wooden Valley Winery in the Suisun Valley.
(Brad Zweerink/MediaNews Group)

SUISUN VALLEY GRAPE GROWERS ASSOCIATION™



Roger King, president of the Suisun Valley Wine Growers Association, said, “The problem of their wine business is the lack of value-added wineries. They’re getting less money for the same product being grown five miles over the hill. They need to generate their own identity. Not everyone out there with 10 to 20 acres of grapes can build a multi-million dollar winery.”

Talking with local farmers, the grapes in Suisun Valley are among the best, on par with those just over the hill in Napa. The weather, soil and tradition all go into creating grapes that are used in some Napa wines. Some large wholesalers have been buying Suisun Valley grapes for years.

The problem now, Suisun Valley Grape Growers Association Vice-president Ron Lanza said, is getting more wineries operating. Lanza, who is a grower at Wooden Valley Winery, can process, store and bottle wines on his property. With his million-dollar equipment, he said he could help his smaller neighbors with the process.

“People want to say ‘Let’s go to Suisun Valley for the day.’ You might need 10 wineries, we have two,” Lanza said. “Everybody has to understand the more wineries, the more people will visit.”

King said there has been an effort the last couple of years to get the word out about Suisun Valley. He is aware the promotion will take a great deal of time.

One venture King and others in the Valley are working on is a wine co-op in which as many as seven local wineries can sell their wines in one store. Because of existing use permits from the former tenant Westwind Winery, they are allowed to sell the wine there.



Vezer Family and Blue Mansion Vineyards General Manager Sam Mizirawi poses inside the tasting room at Vezer winery in the Suisun Valley. *(Rick Roach/MediaNews Group)*

Another farmer looking for ways around current rules has bought buildings on Mankas Corner where construction on a tasting room and deli is in the works in hopes of a July opening. Issam Mizirawi, general manager and cellar master of Vezer Winery, said the county is missing out on a great opportunity.

Speaking of Suisun Valley, Mizirawi said. “It’s not a tourist attraction because we don’t have 10 or 15 or 20 wineries.”

The Vezer Winery is a prime example of what could be. It is off Mankas Corner Road, and includes processing machines and a seldom-used tasting room used only for private functions. Mizwari said going public would cost more in improvements and in securing the proper permits than it is worth.

“People want to make a living, you shouldn’t go bankrupt trying to do it,” he said. “It’s cheaper to find a new location. For some, it’s cheaper to move.”