



## Suisun vinters, growers debut co-op tasting room

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SUISUN VALLEY - Solano County is not a place most people think of as wine country.

Local grape growers and vintners hope to change that with the opening of the new Suisun Valley Wine Cooperative Tasting Room, which showcases wines made with fruit grown in the area.

“Basically what we’re trying to do is establish a presence in a region we think is up and coming,” said Doug Sparks, owner of Sunset Cellars. “We think the level of recognition has lagged significantly behind the quality and value of the product it produces.”

The multi-winery tasting room debuted with a “soft” opening last weekend featuring product from five brands - Sunset Cellars, Twilight Ridge, King Andrews Vineyards, Shale Peak Vineyards and Winterhawk.

Although grapes have been grown in the Suisun Valley since the 1800s, the area has long been overshadowed by the neighboring Napa Valley.

Approximately 3,000 acres of the Suisun Valley are planted in vineyards today with a large number of its grapes going to wineries in Napa and Sonoma for use in their products.

Despite that fact, Sparks said the region has not gained the reputation it deserves.

Sparks estimated that 80 percent of the grapes used in his Lake County-based Sunset Cellars brand wines were grown within four miles of the new co-op tasting room. He is seeking property that will allow him to move his entire operation to the Suisun Valley.

The valley is roughly eight miles long and benefits

from a Mediterranean climate, fertile soils and marine air during the summer months. It offers a variety of growing conditions that are similar to those found in Napa County’s St. Helena at one end and the famous Carneros region on the other.

“I think the growing conditions and the grapes are of comparable quality and the value is better,” Sparks said.

The Suisun Valley was classified as its own American Viticultural Area in 1982 and 20 varieties of grape are grown there including cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, merlot, syrah, barbera, pinot noir and zinfandel.

The local wine producers hope the convenient location of the new co-op tasting room, just three miles north of Interstate 80 in the former West Wind

Winery building, will help raise the profile of the Suisun Valley as a wine grape growing region.

Even the few wineries that already have their own tasting rooms in the Suisun Valley, like Ledgewood Creek Winery, are pulling for the co-op’s success.

“I think it’s great for the valley and will bring more people in,” said Rick Wehman, general manager of Ledgewood Creek and a director of the Suisun Valley Grape Growers Association.

“We need more tasting rooms and more wineries to open in order for the valley to survive and become a destination place.”

Plans call for the co-op tasting room to expand its offerings with room for up to seven wineries with connections to the Suisun Valley.