

Texas Hill Country

Texas

EVERYTHING'S BIGGER IN TEXAS.

CHRISTOPHER BATES, CWE

That old adage apparently extends even to American Viticultural Areas. Of Texas's eight AVAs, the Texas Hill Country ranks as the largest single-state appellation in the country (though it was bumped to the third-largest AVA overall when the Upper Mississippi River Valley was approved last year). Covering 15,000 square miles, with 58 soil types and two subappellations, the Texas Hill Country spans more than 9.6 million acres.

The AVA was recognized in 1991 after intense lobbying by Fall Creek Vineyards' Ed and Susan Auler, who first planted there 35 years ago. According to Gary Gilstrap of Texas Hills Vineyard, "The Hill Country AVA as originally defined by Ed Auler was laid out by roadways rather than geographical- and climate-designated growing regions. He wanted it to be big, like Texas, and he succeeded." In comparison, the entire appellation of Bordeaux spans 130,000 acres—1.3% of the size of the Texas Hill Country. But the Texas AVA has only 800 acres planted to grapes, less than the 973 acres in the Burgundian commune of Meursault.

As a sommelier in the Lone Star State for the last few years, I cannot begin to count the number of times I heard, "So, I understand they are starting to make wine in Texas." Although many consumers may still be discovering the wines being produced here, "starting" is not the right word, unless you mean "starting to hit their stride."

Vines were first planted near El Paso, Texas, by Franciscan priests in the 1650s. Those first Mission grapes established a direction not only for the future of Texas wines, but for American wines in general. The grapes brought from Spain by the conquistadors have only recently been identified as Listan Prieto or Palomino Negro. It was not until 1769 that the Mission strain known as Criollo in Argentina and País in Chile made its way to California.



In 1883, an Italian immigrant named Frank Qualia opened Val Verde Winery in Del Rio, Texas, basing his wines on the Lenoir grape (a teinturier also known as Black Spanish). By the late 19th century, European immigrants were planting *vitifera* vines all over Texas, but because of the many challenges to grape growing in the state, these were never able to take hold. At around the same time, phylloxera was destroying more than 75% of the vineyards of Europe, leaving financial ruin in its wake. It was T.V. Munson of Denison, Texas, who devised a solution: grafting the *vitifera* vines onto phylloxera-tolerant American rootstock. In 1888, Munson was awarded the Legion of Honor by the French government.

By 1895, more than 1,800 acres of vineyards had been planted in Texas, and by 1900, 25 wineries were bonded. Unfortunately, within 20 years, the burgeoning wine industry was virtually wiped out by Prohibition. Many growers turned to table grapes, and some wineries reopened after repeal, but only one survived—Val Verde, which remains the oldest continuously run winery in Texas. By 1970, those 1,800 acres of vineyards had shrunk to 90, but with a change in American attitudes toward wine drinking and the introduction of drip irrigation, the Texas wine industry was back on track. In 1982, 200,000 liters of wine were being produced in the state; in 2009, that volume reached 9.5 million liters, with more than 160 wineries

Christopher Bates has been working in restaurants since he was 15, but started cooking much earlier. After studying hotel administration at Cornell University, he worked in wineries in Valpolicella, the Mosel, New York, Oregon, and Washington. He was general manager at The Inn at Dos Brisas in Brenham, Texas, for more than three and a half years, seeing the program through enfranchisement by Relais & Châteaux and Relais Gourmand and a Mobil Five Star award, and is now executive chef and general manager at the Hotel Fauchère in Milford, Pa. His major obsession is German wines.

APPELLATION



in operation. Compare this to the 250 wineries in Sonoma County, and the Texas wine industry seems to be catching up quickly.

It is difficult to generalize about the terroir of an AVA the size of Belgium, with elevations ranging from 427 to more than 2,395 feet. Annual rainfall ranges from 31.5 to 47 inches throughout the region, most occurring in the fall. It is not uncommon for snow to fall in winter, and March frosts can be a problem. Although Texas summers can be scorching, wide diurnal temperature shifts in the Hill Country result in cool nights. Clay is the dominant soil type, usually expressed as clay loam or sandy clay loam. The clay content of the soil can help retain water and slow the ripening process, and its high cation-exchange capacity also keeps the vines nourished.

Of the two subappellations in the Hill Country, both are located entirely within Gillespie County. Bell Mountain became Texas's first exclusive AVA in November 1986 (Mesilla Valley, approved in March 1985, is shared with New Mexico). It's still one of the smallest, with only 3,200 acres of land, between 1,657 and 1,955

feet in elevation, on the southwest slopes of the Bell Mountains. Only 34-36 inches of rain fall here annually, making it one of the driest areas of the Hill Country, but the clay-based soils extend as far down as 79 inches, with bedrock beyond that. The number of annual degree days is also relatively low (April through October has a 50° base); higher elevations are susceptible to frost. At present, the AVA has only one vineyard selling grapes and one estate winery, Bell Mountain Wine.

Fredericksburg in the Texas Hill Country AVA—this is the official name—was approved in January 1989, making it the second “all-Texas” AVA. Encompassing 70,400 acres at altitudes between 1,467 and 1,896 feet, Fredericksburg in the Texas Hill Country is considerably larger than Bell Mountain. The area was originally



Fall Creek Vineyards entrance (top) and winery (above).

OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

Texas Hills Vineyard Pinot Grigio, Texas Hill Country AVA 2008 \$14

Straw-colored, with an onionskin core and salmon-pink highlights. Aromas of gunflint and minerals are the first to emerge, followed by lemon rind, green almond, green-apple skin, unripe stone fruits, and bubble gum. The dry, medium-bodied palate adds smoky minerality and fresh bread dough, along with zingy lemon acidity. The finish is moderately long.

Flat Creek Estate Sangiovese Super Texan,

Texas Hill Country AVA 2008 \$20

Bright ruby in color, light purple at the core. Aromas of flowers and dust lead to ripe plum, fresh sour cherry, dried cranberry, powdered minerals, dried red roses, lavender, dried meats, and leather. Signs of new wood appear on the medium-bodied palate, with a creamy, vanilla-latte note somewhat marring the purity, but the finish is long and balanced. The oak should integrate with a little time.

Texas Hills Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon Kick Butt Cab,

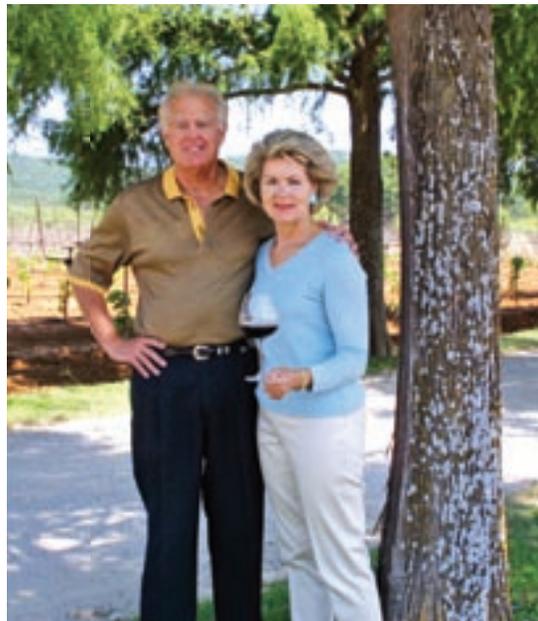
Texas Hills Country AVA 2006 \$18

Deep-ruby core with a pink rim. A slightly burnt nose features black walnuts; roasted plum and fig; ripe, fresh peaches; charred bread; and burnt rubber. The full-bodied palate shows more than the nose, with notes of chocolatey currants (Raisinettes) and bell pepper coming through. The tannins evidence a fair quantity of new wood, but the wine remains balanced.

Fall Creek Estate Port, Texas Hill Country AVA (500 ml) N.V. \$30

A blend of 2005, 2004, and 2002 harvests, bottled in 2007. The color is deep garnet, with orange at the rim. Aromas of sweet raspberry jam and confiture of blueberries and grenadine mingle with slightly briary notes on a nose that is fresh, albeit a bit forward. Raspberry jam, raspberry liqueur, sloe berries, and a green streak all appear on the full-throated palate, followed by baking spices and vibrant orange fruit. The fortified spirits become evident on the finish, which is long and balanced.

Prices are current estimated retail.



Ed and Susan Auler of Fall Creek Vineyards.

acres. The largest decrease was recorded for the No. 5 grape, Sauvignon Blanc, from 300 acres to only 40 in three years. And in their place? Syrah and Black Spanish have both doubled in acreage, and three varieties that were not even recorded separately in 2005—Pinot Noir, Blanc du Bois, and Tempranillo—each had more than 50 acres planted by 2008.

The price per ton might be an even better indicator of demand. Cabernet Sauvignon's price rose only marginally between 2005 and 2008, from \$1,360 to \$1,380 per ton. Despite its minuscule 0.94-ton-per-acre yields, Chardonnay plummeted from \$1,450 to \$1,290 in the same time period. Prices of the other top-five grapes (Merlot, Chenin Blanc, and Sauvignon Blanc) dropped slightly as well. On the other hand, Syrah jumped from \$1,190 to \$1,430, and Tempranillo, which was not even tracked in 2005, is now the most expensive grape on the market at \$1,670 per ton.

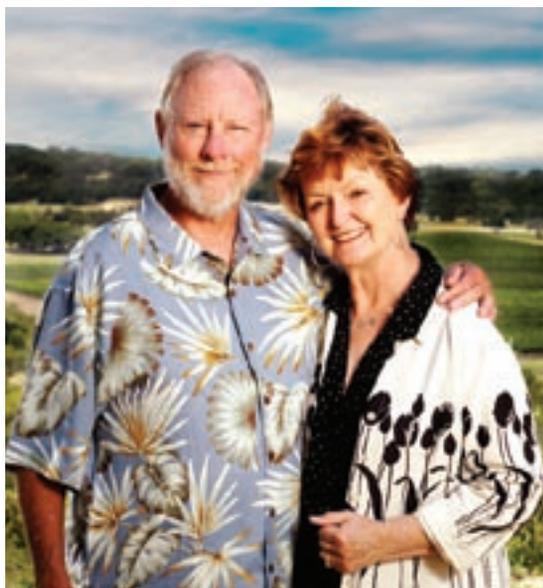
Growers are finally looking more at the climatological and agricultural situation and less at the market when making their planting decisions. As Jim Johnson of Alamosa Wine Cellars puts it, "Texas is not Pinot Noir country." Many others are gambling on hot-climate Rhône, central and southern Italian, and Spanish varieties—including not only Syrah, Sangiovese, and Tempranillo, but also Verdelho, Negro Amaro, and Mourvèdre. Doug Frost, MS, MW, comments that "wineries find it easier to promote well-known grapes that make so-so wine than making better choices and selecting more



Fall Creek winery (middle); Gary Gilstrap of Texas Hills Vineyard (above).

settled in the 1800s by German immigrants, who were also the first to bring viticulture to the Hill Country, and it retains that German identity today. Average rainfall is a bit lower than in Bell Mountain, between 31 and 35 inches per year, again making the clay-loam soils important for drought resistance.

Although it may come as no surprise that Cabernet Sauvignon is king in the land of the longhorn, uneasy lies the head that wears a crown. The Texas harvests of 2006, 2007, and 2008 have been small (averaging as low as 1.1 tons per acre in 2006), while plantings have not only been decreasing, but diversifying. In 2005, of the 2,900 acres planted in Texas, 690 were to Cabernet, 470 to Chardonnay, 330 to Merlot, and 310 to Chenin Blanc. By 2008, total vineyard acreage had dipped to 2,500; Cabernet had dropped 33% to 460 acres, Chardonnay to 360, Merlot to 280, and Chenin Blanc to 300, meaning that the "big four" had declined to only 1,400



Jim and Karen Johnson of Alamosa Wine Cellars (left); Johnson in the winery (right).



APPELLATION



KEY PRODUCERS

Alamosa Wine Cellars

677 County Road 430
P.O. Box 212
Bend, TX 76824
(325) 628-3313
www.alamosawinecellars.com

Fall Creek Vineyards

1820 County Road 222
Tow, TX 78672
(325) 379-5361
www.fcv.com

Flat Creek Estate

24912 Singleton
Bend East Road
Marble Falls, TX 78654
(512) 267-6310
www.flatcreekestate.com

La Cruz de Comal

7405 FM 2722
Startzville, TX 78133
(830) 899-2723
www.lacruzdecomalwines.com

Texas Hills Vineyard

P.O. Box 1480
878 RR 2766
Johnson City, TX 78636
(830) 868-2321
www.texashillsvineyard.com

Val Verde Winery

100 Qualia Drive
Del Rio, TX 78840
(830) 775-9714
www.valverdewinery.com

appropriate grapes, because they would have to teach consumers about those grapes. Black Spanish and Lomanto might well offer some of the best opportunities, but hardly anyone is trying to understand them. True hot-weather-tolerant grapes such as Grenache, Mourvèdre, and Syrah ought to be growing in interest; Tempranillo and Sangiovese require cool nights for proper ripening.”

Lewis Dickson of La Cruz de Comal seems to second this motion. Along with his winemaker, Tony Coturri, he’s focusing on grapes like Black Spanish and Blanc du Bois, a hybrid that was developed by the University of Florida in 1946, but was not propagated until the 1970s. “In the Texas Hill Country, certain grapes do better than others,” Dickson says. “Once in a while, a wonderful Cabernet Sauvignon is made here; that is more the exception than the rule. You don’t plant something just because that’s your favorite to drink. Aside from Mother Nature’s quirkiness, what can you do well and with a fair amount of consistency? Many viticultural areas have four definite seasons. We usually have two: summer and winter. That means our grapes here in the Hill Country do not have the same window of opportunity to achieve ripeness as in more temperate regions.” Dickson suggests that consumers should not try to compare Texas varietals with benchmark styles, but accept that a Texas Merlot will never be a Pomerol and a Texas Syrah will never be a Côte-Rôtie. Unfamiliar grapes that naturally do well in the Hill Country, he believes, should be tasted for what they are, rather than what they are not.

The wines produced by La Cruz de Comal are all-natural—only indigenous yeasts are used, and nothing is added, including sulfur dioxide. But when asked about the potential of organic and biodynamic practices, Johnson says they are all but impossible in Texas. The risks of mold and rot are too high, and the long-term threat of Pierce’s disease requires a firm hand. A product called Admire, added to the irrigation systems, can be effective in creating glassy-winged sharpshooter “free zones,” but it can also build up a long-term chemical tolerance.

No discussion of the Texas Hill Country AVA would be complete without a look at the viticultural hardships here. According to Guy Stout, MS, who supplies local wineries from his Stout Vineyards, “It is a string of challenges. It starts in the spring with the late freeze, which is almost a given, then the high winds preventing consistent fruit set, followed by the hail. Follow that with berry moth, glassy-wings, and multiple fungal attacks. Then comes the fun part of bird netting, deer, and raccoons. Hill Country growers are like prize fighters who keep coming up off the mat to fight another round.”

Most Texas wineries have limited, if any, distribution outside the state; in a time when wine buyers across the country are looking for the next big thing and the next great value, this can be a disappointment. As Gilstrap says, “In Texas, we don’t export wine, we import drinkers! We sell all 10,000-12,000 cases per year right here, so we don’t have the hassle and cost of working with other state governments.” Good for them, bad for the rest of us. 🍷