

AMADOR COUNTY

WINE

Vintners cultivate taste for the unusual

By Stacy Briscoe

Like much of California's history, the story of Amador County, and its wines, dates to the Gold Rush, when many Europeans flocked to the Sierra seeking their fortune. But the immigrants found a different kind of fortune when they discovered that the mountains' foothills were fertile enough to plant a most familiar crop: grapes. Neither gold nor grapes boomed for long. By the 1920s, the gold mines had closed and Prohibition had kicked in. More than 100 established wineries were forced to shut their doors, drying out Amador County financially and alcoholically. It wasn't until Napa had its wine revival in the 1970s that Amador, too, experienced its wine region comeback. Vintners were so excited to make and sell wine again, it seems to have been an instance of "What else can we grow and where else can we grow it?" Luckily for those brave souls, the abandoned Amador farmland was still fertile. So Amador got back on the map as a (albeit small) wine-producing region, today hosting just over 40 wineries, predominantly in the Shenandoah Valley. Amador's revival may have coincided with Napa's, but it's the question, "What else can we grow?" that makes the region stand out on a California wine country map. On paper, Zinfandel is king, with 60 percent of the county's plantings dedicated to the grape and wineries engaging in fisticuffs over



Photos by Noah Berger / Special to The Chronicle

Faye Walters pours wine at Cooper Vineyards, where Barbera is the wine that brings customers to the tasting room.

whose Old Vine Zin is truly the Esteemed Elder. But upon closer inspection, it's clear Amador's niche is as a land of seemingly infinite varietals. The county's climate and terroir most resemble that found in Southern Europe — think Italy, Spain, Portugal and southern France's Rhone Valley. So what you'll find is a huge selection of bold-flavored, food-friendly wines associated with those cul-

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tures: Barbera, Sangiovese, Roussanne, Marsanne, Grenache, Mourvedre, Tempranillo — and those are just some of the more common names. Grafting new vines and experimenting with winemaking methods comes with a bit of a laissez-faire attitude. "Why not try something?" asks Dick Cooper, owner of Cooper Vineyards, whose Amador family farm dates to the walnut orchards of the early 20th century. He credits the success of Amador's experimental wine growers both to the terroir — the Sierra series sandy loam and its abundance of water — as well as the "free exchange of ideas and knowledge among growers and vintners." Ashley Long, assistant winemaker for the more recently established Amador Cellars, agrees, saying the quality soils, the warm climate and the close-knit community of family-owned wineries attracted her family to the area in 2000. And because of these elements, the Longs have been able to expand outside of their original Zinfandel planting to include a whole portfolio of Mediterranean-inspired wines. "Even though we are a small winery, we are currently working with 15 different varietals," says Long. "We are extremely lucky to have a climate that allows for this."

Those ties to the land, fellow wine producers and wine consumers make Amador County stand out for visitors. Most tasting rooms are walk-in friendly, provide complimentary flights and more often than not are hosted by someone with direct ties to the wines or vines. "I think folks are looking for experiences as well as wines," says Jeff Runquist, owner and winemaker of Jeff Runquist Wines. "When their paths intersect with a winemaker or winery owner, it makes their day." Though Runquist sources his fruit from all over California, he has chosen to establish his business in Amador because he feels the personal connection between winery and wine consumer is much more common in Amador than in many other wine regions. "We make good wine," he says, "but we also make memorable experiences." It seems the same attitude that first brought vintners back to Amador in the 1970s is attracting a new stream of curious wine drinkers today — those who dare to ask, "What else can we drink and where else can we drink it?"

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