

Maryland Wine Industry Sees Tremendous Growth Over Past Decade

COLLEGE PARK – Maryland's wine industry, while not a powerhouse in the world of vino, has seen tremendous growth over the past decade and the state has the potential to become a major center of wine production in time, experts said.

But to realize that potential, the state has a number of challenges to overcome — competition from better known wine producing states, the perception that Maryland produces low quality wines and the impact of a changing climate on grapes.

"If you look at California and where they were, say, 40 years ago, it looks a lot like what it does [in Maryland] now," said Chris Kent, the winemaker at Woodhall Wine Cellars in Baltimore County, which has been in operation for 30 years. "It's fun to think the next generation could be something like California became."

Maryland wineries have increased sales every year since 2001, jumping from \$6.1 million to \$24.4 million by 2011, according to an analysis of bottle sales by the Maryland Wineries Association. The number of wineries throughout the state has ballooned as well, from about a dozen in 2000 to the 64 currently operating in the state. People inquire about opening wineries daily, said Briana Berg of the Maryland Wineries Association.

"[There's been] a significant growth in a short period of time," Kent said. "You can't help but think that people are more aware of the local wine scene just because there is so much out there."

Unlike Virginia—which has extensive backing from the state tourism industry, prestigious festivals and awards to draw interest to state-made wines and lots of private investment—Maryland is still attempting to find its footing in the wine world.

Staking a claim within the national market is especially difficult. California wines dominate both domestic wine sales and the public's idea of American wine.

Simply put, when consumers think Maryland, they think crab not wine.

Climate Change and Maryland Wine

Warmer temperatures and a changing global climate could help the wine industry in Maryland by allowing a wider variety of grapes to grow throughout the state, climate scientists said.

"There are winners and losers," from climate change, said Antonio Busalacchi, an advanced sommelier and climate scientist at the University of Maryland. "Some regions around the world will benefit from a warming climate."



A selection of wines from Elk Run Vineyards. Photo courtesy bigbirdz/Flickr.

Busalacchi has studied 24 of the major wine regions throughout the world—half in the old world regions like France and Italy, and half in the new world, like here in the U.S. He found that wines produced in old world regions face significant risk from climate change.

A changing climate in Maryland would mean warmer springs and summers, making for longer growing seasons, Busalacchi said. But a warming climate could hurt the wine industry as well. Temperatures that reach too high can constrict the growing season and ruin crops. The Mid-Atlantic could face an eight fold increase in days that reach 100 degrees fahrenheit or more, Busalacchi said.

This is true of cold temperatures as well, he said. While he expects a decrease in total frost days along the East Coast, frost could become more unpredictable—something that could ruin an entire harvest.

“If a frost comes in when a grape vine is flowering or berries have just begun to appear, you can lose a significant amount of harvest,” Busalacchi said.

Luckily for Maryland wineries, new world wine production is much more flexible and able to respond to changes in climate than old world wine regions, Busalacchi said.

“It’s not as tied down by tradition so it’s easier to switch practices or mix varietals,” he said.

Global climate change could force age-old grape growing regions to shift their location to more hospitable climates.

Places like Bordeaux and Burgundy in France and California’s Napa Valley will see significant changes in climate in coming years, Busalacchi said.

Different varietals of grapes grow best in certain climates. Many French wines like Burgundy, Champagne and Bordeaux are named after the region they are grown in. Some require certain types of soil or certain amount of sun to grow properly. Some grapes simply require a cooler climate.

Thus, a shift in climate could completely change certain wine growing regions.

“The style of wine will have to change, the blend of grapes will change,” Busalacchi said of the impact of climate change on wine.

—Kate Andries

“It’s a very local market primarily based on the day traveller coming in for the weekend and getting a bottle or two,” said Antonio Busalacchi, an advanced sommelier at consulting company Vino Veritas and a climate scientist at the University of Maryland. “It’s very much at the cellar door.”

Ed Boyce, a relative newcomer to the Maryland wine scene, began exploring the option of opening a winery along with his wife in 2001. It took another seven years to actually produce a bottle of vino.

Their winery—Black Ankle Vineyards—is located in Mount Airy in the heart of central Maryland. Producing red and white table wines, Black Ankle tries to make the best possible wine out of the grapes that they grow, Boyce said.

“We could be a really famous wine region,” Boyce said of Maryland. “[But] we’re racing against development. The question is, can we get our industry going fast enough to get that land.”

This is especially relevant to wineries—or people interested in opening a winery—looking at using the land in central Maryland and surrounding Baltimore, where developable land is at a premium, Boyce said.

Another challenge presents itself in the form of climate—different regions throughout the state have vastly different growing requirements. Many naysayers of Maryland wine cite the region's humid, rainy climate for its inability to produce wine at the same level of California.

Excess humidity and rain can cause fungus to grow on the grapes and thus, ruin the harvest, Busalacchi said.

"These grape vines are so picky and responsive, you could almost move 20 feet and get a different wine," Boyce said.

Maryland has four distinct climate regions: the Piedmont Plateau in central Maryland, the Eastern Shore, the southern plain and the western mountains. Each region presents its own set of challenges related to climate, and some grapes grow better in one region than in others.

"With the diverse climate that we have in Maryland, regionally, whether you're on the Eastern Shore or down [in central Maryland], you have to be concerned about what you grow in that area and the temperatures," said Carol Wilson, owner of Elk Run Vineyards.

Combine these issues and you get a region that's hard to establish as a wine powerhouse.

But long-term winemakers in Maryland say that a quiet movement is underfoot, one in which Maryland wine is making a play for national and international recognition—and some are getting it.

Elk Run Vineyards, owned by Fred and Carol Wilson, opened in 1980 and was the first winery to plant vines similar to the ones grown in California.

While they are best known for their reds, Carol Wilson said, their Gewurztraminer, Pinot Noir, and Syrah have been getting attention at both national and international competitions. The winery has won more than 600, Wilson said.

This is not necessarily the norm for many Maryland wines, but experts say it could be in the future.

"It has its challenges but I wouldn't move anywhere else," Boyce said.

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