

## America's Greenest Wine Region

WineNotes by Heidi Cusick Dickerson

This is the first of an ongoing column on the vineyards, wineries and wine events in Mendocino County. Sponsored by the Mendocino Winegrape & Wine Commission, the columns are meant to bring to life the stories of our neighboring farmers and vintners as they bring a crop from the field to your glass.

We've come a long way since grapes were first planted in Mendocino County in the 1850s. Thwarted goldminers found fertile valleys to grow profitable crops and hillsides to plant wine grapes. Early Italian settlers grew grapes for their homemade wine. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 3,000 acres of wine grapes were being cultivated. Eleven years ago when I wrote *Mendocino: The Ultimate Wine and Food Lovers Guide*, there were 36 wineries. Today there are 73. More than 16,000 acres are planted in vineyards out of a total of 2.4 million acres in the county.

The Mendocino wine industry contributes xx jobs and xx dollars to the local economy. Between fifty and seventy-five percent of the grapes grown here are shipped to wineries outside the county. Vineyard jobs may be plentiful but they don't pay as well as a winery job. Local growers and vintners took a giant leap in 2005 when they voted to become a Commission under the auspices of the state of California. They realized it was time to deal with the issue that Mendocino has long been a supplier of premium grapes to award winning wineries in Napa and Sonoma. Fees based on tons of grapes and cases of wine are collected from every grape grower and winery in the county. The funds are used for education and promotion of the Mendocino County wine industry.

Growing wineries already in the county is a way to stimulate the economy without adding another vineyard. In order to do this, the MWWC is working on getting the word out into the world about the incredible wines grown and made here. Other areas such as Lake County and Lodi are ahead of Mendocino in the recognition arena.

What makes Mendocino special? Using “America’s Greenest Wine Region” as a motto might sound gimmicky or trendy until you look around our communities. Nearly a quarter of all the grapes grown here are organic. This is more than any other winegrowing region can claim. In that percentage, 689 acres are biodynamic. Mendocino Wine Company, home of Parducci, the county’s oldest continuously operating winery, is the world’s first carbon neutral winery. One of its partners Paul Dolan is in demand as a speaker on sustainability and was responsible during his time at Fetzer Vineyards for its recognition of sustainable business and winery practices. Charlie Barra, the *dean* of Mendocino grape growers, will this year embark upon his 63<sup>rd</sup> harvest of organically grown grapes.

At least 16 solar companies are listed in the phone book. Real Goods and the Solar Living Institute attract thousands of people to SolFest every August to learn about alternative energy. Solar cells are increasingly powering winery equipment, lights, pumps, and even tractors, which are just a frequently powered by biodiesel. Our county was the first to ban genetically modified organisms in any plant or seedling grown here. Ukiah Brewing Company has the first all organic brewpub (it takes a lot of beer to make wine!). Mendocino County is a leader; being sustainable is who we are and how we live.

As each of the wineries is profiled in alphabetical order, individual stories will unfold and a bit of education will be passed on. Depending on the season and the weather I’ll take you into a winery or vineyard and attempt to show the uniqueness of the place and the effort required to run a small or large business in a rural county. We’ll experience a particular aspect that is happening to that winery at the time. We’ll learn why a certain way of pruning or thinning is done. What is it really like to go to the extra effort a biodynamic certification requires? How will the horrific frost of the past spring affected growth and potential crops in the fall? What about the wild fire smoke that lingered for so long all over the county? How does that affect grapes when they are at their green immature stage?

Join me as we embark upon tour of the county. Albertina Wine Cellars in Hopland is the subject of next week’s WineNotes.

*To learn more about what to do and where to stay in Mendocino County, visit [www.gomendo.com](http://www.gomendo.com). For more information about Mendocino County wineries and wine regions, visit [www.mendowine.com](http://www.mendowine.com).*

