



Winter Newsletter 2005-06, Volume 12

Tularosa Vineyards on a Mission for history

While the Mission vine is undoubtedly the oldest grape variety cultivated in New Mexico, in present time, the Mission grape has far more historical than commercial significance. The vine is called the "Mission" vine, because of the Franciscans who brought it here, but it is known as Criolla in Argentina and Pais in Chile. On a side note there are also Mission figs and olives (also brought by the Spaniards). For well over a century, the Mission grape has defined California viticulture, but it barely exists in California as a variety today. It was first planted in the U.S. in 1629 in a Pueblo village of Senecu, New Mexico near modern day San Antonio. Most wine books mention the fact that the California wine industry was started at Mission San Diego in 1769, most without mentioning New Mexico. Another case for one of our 50 is missing? A missionary man named Esteban Perea is credited with the 1629 Development at Senecu. David L. Wickham the founder of Tularosa Vineyards started a small commercial vineyard of Mission grapes from the cutting of a vine in the back yard of La Luz New Mexico resident Ben Chavez around 1989. The vines were cultivated just like most modern day vineyards and exactly the way the Franciscan fathers started their vineyards, by cutting a small cane in the winter off of the mother vine and planting it in the ground in spring. The vine from which Mr. Wickham started the small vineyard from was at the time probably a little over 100 years old. The vine had survived because of acequia or ditch water and the fact that Ben Chavez' father had taught him how to train and prune the vine for health. This one particular Mission vine had at times produced over 300 lbs. of grapes by itself! The vine was approximately 30 inches (more like a tree) or so in diameter and could cover with its canopy around 1/8 of an acre. The Mission vine was planted in Tularosa as settlers from Las Cruces settled the area bringing the vines and other fruits with them. Tularosa Vineyards will be planting another 1 acre of Mission, because if we don't it might be lost forever in historic obscurity. The other acre of vines will be planted to Black Muscat.

Tularosa winemaking circa 1870

The following item in The Alamogordo News, September 1932 interestingly describes wine production in Tularosa in the 1870's.

In 1870 Tularosa had grown in population to nearly a thousand souls and had sufficient strength to successfully resist the Indians, even in outlying locations. Five or six hundred acres were farmed with Tularosa river water. Grapes were planted and wine was made to supply the local requirements. The principal product was a native sour wine locally known as "cerque" and was freely used by many residents. The usual method of manufacture was very primitive and crude, and in present times would be condemned as unsanitary and unfit for human consumption. The grapes were emptied into rawhide containers; sack like affairs (Tinas) suspended on forked posts, which in turn carried square frames of poles to which the rims of the tramping sacks were lashed. Men in their bare feet tramped them to a pulpy mass, sinking to their knees in the process. The "pummies" were then skimmed from the surface as they rose to the top of the fermenting wine. After 10 days, without disturbing the sediment collected in the bottom, and cool fermentation was allowed to complete. The wines were deemed ready, 30 days from the second draining. Some wines produced were a well-flavored stimulating beverage, while others made a vinegar-like product that intoxicated and sickened with a nauseating flavor. The most palatable was of course in greater demand and brought a better price, but the inferior stuff was still consumed at a profit to the producers.

