

Arizona welcomes grapes of Erath

Oregon vintner drawn by state's 'kiss of the sun'

By Peter Corbett
The Arizona Republic

Arizona's winegrowers are toasting the state's newest vintner, a pio-

neer among Oregon winemakers, who they say will add legitimacy to their modest industry.

Dick Erath, known for his pinot noir, recently purchased 200 acres about 11 miles southeast of Willcox.

Erath plans to start growing grapes there next year, increasing Arizona's 300 acres of wine-grape cultivation by two-thirds, said Rod

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WINE Oregon maker to start Arizona vineyard

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Keeling, president of the Arizona Wine Growers Association.

"To have Dick come down and buy a big chunk of ground and make a commitment to plant a vineyard validates this as a place to grow quality wine," Keeling said.

Because of its harsh desert climate, Arizona has largely been ignored as a wine-growing state.

But the soil and weather conditions in southeastern Arizona's high deserts, at elevations of 4,300 to 5,400 feet, are conducive to producing wines similar to those in Southern Europe.

Growers here hope that Arizona can follow the path of Washington and Oregon, where Erath started his vineyard in 1967 in the Willamette Valley.

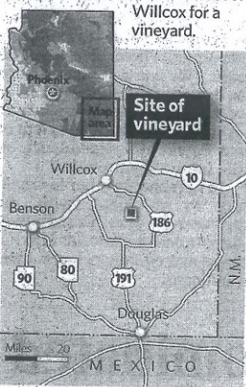
Erath Vineyards sold about 60,000 cases of wine last year, which is four times as much as Arizona's entire production, Keeling said.

Erath Vineyards got a 35 percent boost in sales of its pinot noir late last year as a result of the movie *Sideways*, in which wine, particularly pinot noir, is central to the story.

Naturally, Erath loved the movie for "its embedded mes-

New Arizona vineyard

Oregon winemaker Dick Erath, known for his pinot noir, has purchased 200 acres southeast of



Source: Arizona Wine Growers Association
Mark Waters/The Arizona Republic

sage to drink pinot noir," he said.

Erath, 69, who has wintered in Tucson since 1991, said growing grapes in Arizona is just the opposite of Oregon, where grape growers are limited by the cool, wet climate.

"If you think of the famous wines from Italy and Spain and

southern France, they love the kiss of the sun," Erath said. "And Arizona has plenty of that."

State officials said that other investors may follow Erath's move to Arizona.

"This will add to Arizona's growing reputation as a wine-making state, which with 16 wineries and vineyards in operation is admittedly small but growing in impact," said Joe Yuhás, deputy director of the Arizona Department of Commerce.

Arizona's wine industry contributes an estimated \$20 million to the state's economy and attracts nearly 15,000 visitors, primarily to the vineyards and wineries in the southern part of the state, Yuhás said.

Keeling, who heads the growers association, said tourists flock to the area's bed-and-breakfast lodges, adding that "nobody stays in B&Bs to watch cotton grow." And wine grapes are less thirsty, he added.

Bob Lee, owner of Cave Creek Wines in Phoenix, said he has already seen an increase in interest in Arizona wines among locals and tourists. His shop is on one of three wine tours that the growers association promotes.

Much of the industry is in

southeastern Arizona near Sonoita and northeast of the tiny community of Kansas Settlement.

But other winemakers include Echo Canyon Winery near Sedona and Granite Creek Vineyards in Chino Valley.

Some of Arizona's best wine is produced by Kent Callaghan of Callaghan Vineyards in Elgin. Callaghan's 2002 Syrah was the winner of the Jefferson Cup, a prestigious wine award, competing against 530 wineries.

Arizona wine industry officials say the state's wineries could get a huge boost if the U.S. Supreme Court rules in favor of interstate wine shipping directly to consumers. They would also need a change in Arizona law to ship wine directly to consumers out of state.

Meanwhile, the growers association is eager for Erath to start producing wine.

Erath said he has dug a well, set up an Airstream trailer on his land near Willcox and is ready to go.

"I've just got to figure out how to keep the snakes away," he joked.

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