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Tourists follow the Sunnyslope wine trail through a rolling patchwork of farmland. More than a dozen Idaho vineyards have wine tasting rooms on the trail.

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by Alyssa Johnson

Tim and Helen Harless searched every nook and cranny in the wine meccas of the West to find the perfect spot for their dream vineyard. Then they discovered Idaho. The rich farming country between Homedale and Caldwell featured the perfect combination of weather, soil and community—just what they couldn't find in the more tony wine regions of California, Oregon or Washington.

"This place is world class. It has all this potential; it is off the charts good," exclaimed Tim Harless. The couple opened the HAT Ranch Winery in 2011 on ground that had been farmed since 1902. Today they sell wines ranging from merlot to riesling. The small number of vineyards in Idaho was an important factor in their decision. Even though the wine industry in Idaho is growing, it still doesn't compare to the sheer volume of wineries in Oregon, Washington and especially California, which is home to more than 40 percent of the total wineries in the United States. A winery in Idaho has

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more opportunities to be recognized for its accomplishments rather than getting lost in the crowd. That, along with lower land and business costs, gives Idaho an attractive edge, Harless explained.

In a state known for its mountains, deserts, whitewater, forests and of course, potatoes, one might not expect Idaho's wine regions to attract much attention. But the wine industry is coming of age according to Moya Dolsby, executive director of the Idaho Wine Commission. The industry enjoyed steady growth in its infancy, with 11 wineries established by 2002. Then interest skyrocketed over the ensuing 10 years, with 50 wineries doing business by 2012 as new growers like HAT Ranch were attracted by affordable land, ideal soils and a favorable climate. Thirty-two of those wineries are within 40 miles of Boise.

A Boise State University economic impact study in 2008 found the wine industry added \$73 million to the state's economy, including \$19 million in employee wages. Those numbers have likely increased because more wineries have come on line since the study was done. There are now approximately 1,600 acres of vines planted in the state. Those produced 3,000 tons of grapes and 200,000 12-bottle cases last year. Dolsby predicts even more growth in the future. "I see a lot more media exposure and more vineyards being planted. We're going to see some big investment coming into Idaho ... a big wine company come in and plant," she said. Five new vineyards are now in the early planting stages.

The recent boom in the wine business belies the fact that Idaho has a long wine-making history that dates back to the 1860s. Some of the first grapes planted in the Pacific Northwest were grown in northern Idaho. The original grape-growing center began in the Clearwater Valley near Lewiston in 1864 when French and German immigrants planted more than 200 acres. The first wineries in the Pacific Northwest also started in northern Idaho. Idaho's nationally renowned wine industry won awards around the world before state and later federal Prohibition brought production to a halt in 1916. The vineyards were ripped out and the state lost its growers. Prohibition ended in 1933, but Idaho's wine industry didn't come back until almost four decades later. Wine grapes were finally planted again in 1970, this time in the southwestern part of the state near the Snake River. For many years, only state-run liquor stores could sell a limited selection of wine. That diminished the market and discouraged investment in the local wine industry. But the legislature ended the state monopoly in 1971 by allowing the sale of wine in grocery stores. That obstacle lifted, Ste. Chapelle, Idaho's first modern-day winery, opened its doors in 1976. Founded by the Symms



David R. Day

Koenig Winery on Grape Lane in Caldwell distills vodka from famous potatoes. Apricots, cherries and pears distilled into brandy open a market for local fruit.

family, the winery, now under different ownership, is still producing wine on its hillside near Marsing. In the ensuing years other wineries sprung up as vintners discovered the advantages of planting in Idaho.

The Snake River country's combination of rich soil, low humidity, high altitude and sunny weather creates conditions perfect for growing a variety of wine grapes. Cool nights and warm summer days are ideal to produce the right balance of grape acids and sugars. Even the cold winters, which might seem like a disadvantage, work to the growers' favor because the vines go dormant, allowing the plants to rest and conserve important carbohydrates for the coming season. The harsh weather also rids the plants of bugs and discourages disease.

Southern Idaho's unique soil and climate, or *terroir* in wine terminology, was recognized in 2007 when the Snake River Valley was named Idaho's first American Viticulture Area (AVA), which denotes it as a unique grape-

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Wineburg Wine Notes

Ron Bitner of Sunnyslope helped pioneer the 1980s Snake River wine revival. In 2013, his winery was named Canyon County Family Farm of the Year.



Bitner's award-winning wines.

Guy Hand

growing region. There are about 200 AVAs in the country administered by the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau, including more than 10 in Washington alone. An AVA requires an extensive federal

approval process, including a geological study of the region. "An AVA puts you on the map and means 'you have arrived ... good for you.' When an AVA is approved there is huge national attention in the wine world. Again, it proves that Idaho is a good place to grow grapes," Dolsby said.

The AVA encompasses a large area in southwestern Idaho and eastern Oregon, as defined by the boundary of the now dry, four-million-year-old Lake Idaho. The Snake River is the backbone of the territory and the soils contained within the old lakebed make up the unique terroir that earned the AVA designation. With more than five million acres, the Snake River Valley AVA covers 8,263 square miles that stretch west from Twin Falls to include 12 counties: Ada, Adams, Boise, Canyon, Elmore, Gem, Gooding, Jerome, Owyhee, Payette, Twin Falls and Washington, along with Malheur and Baker counties in eastern Oregon. That makes it one of the largest AVAs in the country.

The great Bonneville Flood that carved out the Snake River Canyon some 14,500 years ago was the geological event that endowed the AVA with its special characteristics. The boulders, silt and sand that cascaded through southwestern Idaho left a legacy of sandy loam that makes the region an ideal place for orchards and vineyards. Like most of the great wine regions in the world, especially in cool climate countries like Germany, France

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The Snake River Valley American Viticulture Area, designated in 2007, encompasses 14 arid counties from Jerome to Baker, Oregon. Twenty-four vineyards span 1,800 acres.

and Italy, Idaho's AVA is located along the banks of a great river. The commission is currently working toward another AVA in central Idaho near Lewiston and Clarkston, Washington, where there are 20 vineyards and five wineries.

Last year the wine commission completed a three-year mapping project of the Snake River Valley AVA led by Greg Jones of Southern Oregon University. The study matches grape varieties to their ideal combination of soil, sun, elevation, slope and climate. Future growers can use the data to identify the right sites for the right grapes, critical information as the state stands poised to attract new investment. Slightly more than 74,000 acres in the Snake River Valley are suitable for wine grape production, the study concluded. That is almost 50 times more ground than is planted in grapes today. "We don't even know where the best grapes can be grown yet. There is so much potential, so many opportunities," said Dolsby.

Ron Bitner, owner of Bitner Vineyards and the main research coordinator of the study, told the *Capital Press* newspaper that site selection for new growers is critical. "We are a new industry here in Idaho and the ability to pinpoint ideal growing sites here in the high-desert country is essential to know before spending \$12,000 an acre or more to plant wine grapes. Site selection and varietal selection are the keys to the growth of our industry."

Bitner, called the "godfather of the Idaho wine industry" by Dolsby, planted his first vineyard 32 years ago in the Sunnyslope area.

He bought a plot of land overlooking the Snake River Valley in 1979. "I bought it for the view. As it turned out, it is a world-class site for growing wine grapes because of the south-facing slopes," Bitner said. There were no



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The Idaho Wine Commission estimates a \$73 million impact on the state's economy. Director Moya Dolsby, pictured, sees enormous potential for growth.

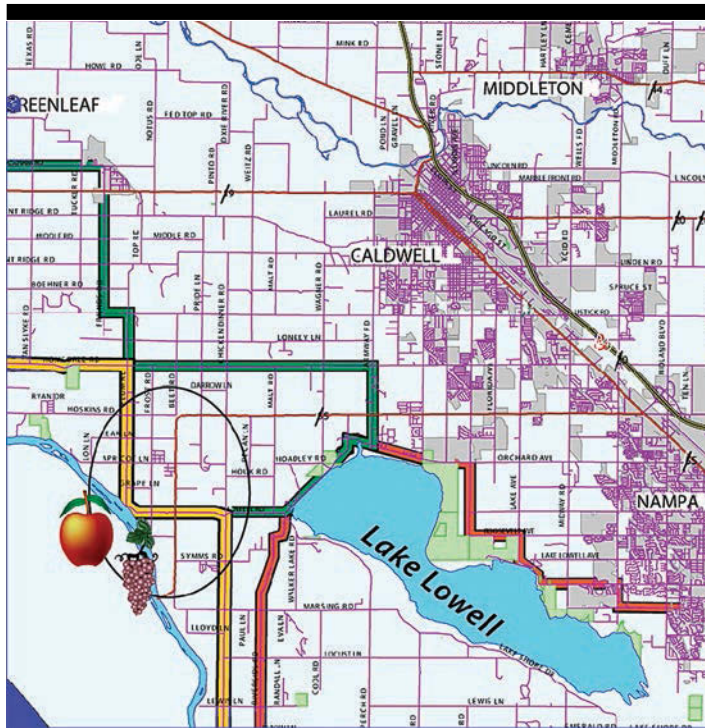


Guy Hand

Start-up wineries line state scenic byways that follow the Snake River Canyon from Kuna to the Apple Valley. Opposite: two Snake River scenic byways cross vineyards west of Lake Lowell.

vineyards in the area at that time and Ste. Chapelle, which had just moved from Emmett to south of Caldwell, was in the process of being built. Bill Broich, Ste. Chapelle's winemaker, told Bitner his land had potential. "I was scratching my head one day wondering what I was going to do with these really steep slopes. Bill said, 'Well, you have a world-class site for chardonnay.' And I said, 'That's cool ... what's chardonnay?' I really didn't know a thing about wine grapes," said Bitner. Those first 1981 plantings of riesling and chardonnay make his land some of the oldest blocks in Idaho.

Bitner and his wife Mary have come a long way since then, now producing 1,000-plus cases of hand-harvested and hand-crafted wines from their



Snake River Valley Scenic Byway

16 acres of estate-grown grapes. Bitner, a professional entomologist with a Ph.D. from Utah State University, calls himself a “bee biologist,” and his work with the insects has allowed him to travel extensively nationally and internationally, including nine trips to Australia. As the Intermountain representative

to the Wine America Board and president of the National Wine Grape Growers Association, Bitner provides a national perspective on the Idaho wine industry. “People are wanting to put new vineyards in here in Idaho,” he told a writer from *Wine & Vines* magazine in August 2012. “We don’t have a lot of acreage here yet, but I think in the past 10 years we’ve really laid the groundwork for people to come in and take a look.”

The Idaho Wine Commission is the focal point of Idaho’s marketing and promotion efforts. Supported by a portion of the tax on wine and by member assessments, Dolsby said the commission helps growers with legislative issues, provides education to consumers, media, sellers and distributors and spreads the word about Idaho wine. The commission is trying to erase the stigma that Idaho is in the great white north, a place too cold, too high and too deep in the mountains to grow good vines. To counter that, the commission markets the success that Idaho has enjoyed and helps prospective buyers understand that the state’s wine industry can stand alongside



Idaho Wine Commission

Working the Sunnyslope harvest, 2013.

those from other states. "There has been a big improvement in our image, but you still get skeptics. Over all, I think the consumer has become smarter and more willing to try something new," added Dolsby, who makes 5-6 annual trips to promote Idaho wine at out-of-state wine events. "We want them to try Idaho wine, but we also want them to come here to see our wineries ... to see that we have a thriving industry that is producing award-winning wines."

The commission is now making a push to promote Idaho wines to consumers in their own backyard. Only 6 percent of Idahoans drink local wine. To increase that percentage, the commission launched an "I Support Idaho Wines" campaign that includes billboards on Interstate 84 and banners in downtown Boise. "Why not focus on our 1.5 million customers right here in this state? There's a huge growth opportunity right here with our own residents," commission board member Gregg Alger told the *Capital Press* in December 2012.

Idaho's wine industry is changing rapidly and the list of new wineries is sure to grow. A commission study projects that Idaho will have 75 wineries by 2015. While the number of producers is expanding, production still remains limited. Each winery specializes in just a few varieties and all are working to find the best grapes possible through meticulous vineyard management. But the recent success of Idaho wines and the small number of wineries results in a "bad news, good news" scenario. Increasing demand and limited production means many of the best Idaho wines sell out quickly. That's one of the drawbacks of success, but as vineyards expand and Idaho attracts more start-up wineries, this too will change.

One of the biggest challenges facing the industry is that the supply of grapes hasn't kept pace with demand as wine becomes more and more popular. It takes 3-5 years for grapevines to mature, said Dolsby, so the gap in Idaho production will remain in the short term. "It's expensive ... you need a lot of capital up front before you can recoup that investment. But there are opportunities out there. Idaho has a lot more room for vintners."

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Alyssa Johnson, Twin Falls, graduated in December 2012 with a degree in Political Science.