

# Kentucky officials: With great Bluegrass vintages, why travel?

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Kentucky Correspondent

FRANKFORT, Ky. — Kentucky has seen a marked increase in the number of vineyards and wineries over the past decade, bringing the states to a level in the wine business not seen here before.

Tyler Madison, Grape and Wine program director for the Kentucky Department of Agriculture (KDA), said the industry has grown exponentially since 2000, with 66 wineries or small farm wineries currently operating in the state.

One thing that has helped is the availability of grant money to help prospective wine makers get started or remain sustainable.

"We've got two grants that we are using now to directly help the wineries as well as the wholesalers," Madison said. "One is a marketing cost-share grant that is an allotted amount we get each year, that helps (producers) get a 50 percent reimbursement on their advertising and marketing receipts."

There is a law in Kentucky that states producers must use wholesalers to distribute their products. To make smaller operations more appealing to these wholesalers, the other grant is used on an opt-in basis and gives back a \$20 per-case reimbursement for small farm wineries.

These grants have helped new producers as well as new distributors, which ultimately has helped the industry expand.

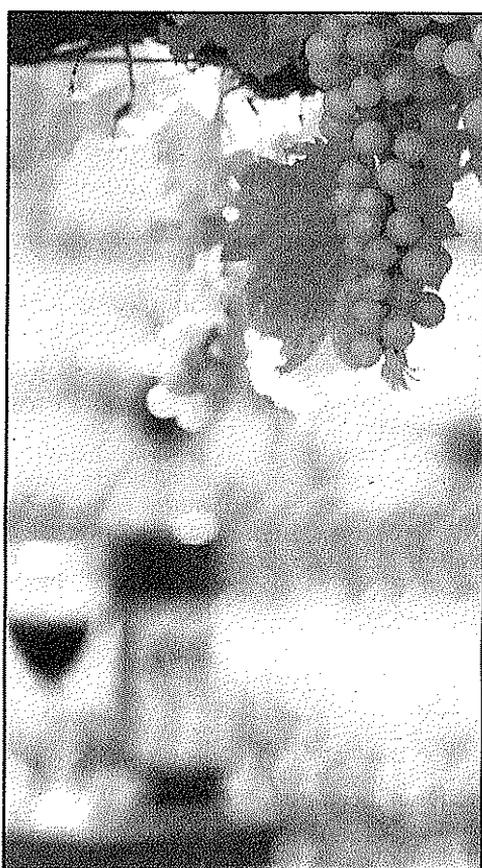
Just last month the Kentucky Agricultural Development Board approved \$515,000 in Agricultural Development Funds for the Kentucky Vineyard Society, to maintain the Viticulture Extension and Research program, including viticulture specialist, enologist and technicians.

Quantifying the return on investment is something KDA and the University of Kentucky (UK) are working on through an economic impact study, added Madison.

The study will provide a more exact figure of just what the industry means to the state in dollars.

Tom Cottrell, the principal extension enologist at UK, said there is much that goes into producing a good wine — of course, beginning with good grapes.

"Not only does it take time, it's quite complicated. Because of the disease pressure, a special spray is needed once a week, and you are not going to use the same spray week after week because the molds and fungus will get used to it," he said. "The pruning has to be done just right; the spraying has to be done just right."



**KENTUCKY IS BECOMING** more widely known for its quality of wine as the industry expands. (Tim Thornberry photo)

He said wineries that do grapes really well have to be in the right locations, and choosing the right topography is critical. Cottrell also said there are several procedures that have to be done correctly to make a tasty wine; such as choosing the right yeast for fermentation and the right chemistry.

"It's a lot of physical work and it ain't cheap," he said. "It takes a great deal of money. To do a 3,000- to 4,000-case (per year) winery requires that you have access in the first four or five years to \$2 million to \$3 million."

Cottrell thinks the number of wineries will continue to rise, though, perhaps crossing the 100-mark within another five or six years. One thing wineries here and in other states have done to offset the cost of production is to create other activities at their venues, including music events and food.

Madison wants to promote more from his office that wineries aren't just wineries anymore; they are actually destinations.

"With people staying home on 'staycations,' it's nice to know you don't have to go to Napa or Italy anymore, when we have high-class wines with attractive vineyards and tasting rooms. It's coming along, definitely," he said.

More award-winning wines are being produced in Kentucky, too. Madison said he continually hears from wineries that have won medals in competitions all over the country.

"It's pretty impressive to think that, from basically not having a wine industry 10 years ago to having a wine industry now that is being touted nationwide," he said. "There's a definite increase in quality. It's pretty impressive what they're doing now."

While most people still think of California when it comes to wine, from an historical perspective Kentucky was once a front-runner in the business, being home to the first commercial vineyard in the country back in 1798. From there the state became the third-largest grape and wine producer in the country until Prohibition.

It wasn't until 1976 that legislation passed allowing wineries to operate here once again, but tobacco was still king in terms of farming. With the federal tobacco quota buyout, however, many farmers began looking at diversification options — and grapes obviously looked good to many.

That trend is all over the country. At least one study from Colorado State University reports wine is now produced in every state, and grapes are the highest-value fruit crop in the country and the seventh largest crop overall.

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