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Idaho's Wine Industry Ventures into Tourist Realm

MARSING (AP) — Idaho's agricultural heritage goes back to the days of its earliest settlers. But in the past several years, local growers have discovered a whole new way to make money — agritourism.

Visitors come to sample one of Idaho's newest agricultural industries: wine making. Although the first Idaho wineries appeared in the mid-1800s, they vanished during Prohibition and didn't return until the 1970s.

While the Idaho wine making industry remains small compared to other western states, it's growing. And it's attracting wine connoisseurs from throughout the nation. That brings money not only to wineries and vineyards, but to hotels, restaurants and rental car companies. And, Idaho Wine Commission President Moya Shatz Dolsby said, they often leave impressed — even wine tasters from states with large, well-established wine making industries. "I think they're surprised that they're impressed," she said.

Today, the latest agribusiness venture in southwest Idaho is the wine tour. The best tours are tailored to the tastes of each tour group, Winery Seekers Wine Tours owner Kathy Johnson said. It's best to start the uninitiated out on milder, beginner-friendly wines, but more experienced connoisseurs will prefer something more advanced and complex.

Some like whites, some like reds. And the beauty of the Treasure Valley is that it has a little bit of everything all nestled into a relatively small, easily-accessible area. Many start small, Johnson said. But what starts as a hobby can turn into a business.

"We have quite a few backyard wine makers in Idaho," she said. "That's where they make wine for themselves, and then they eventually want to go ahead and actually produce their own wines. That's when they get really involved."

They don't all stay in the business forever, or even necessarily for very long. But whenever Idaho wineries drop off the map, new ones rise to take their place.

"We have 50 wineries in the state currently," Dolsby said. "And just to give you an idea of the growth, in 2002 there were 11 wineries. In 2008 there were 32. And that's pretty darn good in a 10-year period, especially when we've been in this economic downturn in the past couple years."

Idaho's vineyards grow a total of about 1,200 acres of grapes, Dolsby said. That's pretty small compared to other wine-producing states — Washington, by comparison, has about 40,000 acres of vineyards and 750 wineries.

But despite its size, Idaho-produced wines are already making waves among enthusiasts nationwide. In fact, it could even be a selling point — with growth comes exposure to a whole new clientele, and that leads to customer enthusiasm.

"We're that new thing that people are talking about," Dolsby said. "And hey, I'll take it. I'm excited for that."

When Dolsby first arrived in Idaho from Washington, bringing what she learned serving on the Washington State Wine Commission, one of the first things she heard from local winemakers was that no one ever came out to visit them.

The first step was easy, she said: maps. People won't come if they don't know where to go. The second step was a little more complicated: getting the state's tourism officials involved.

Before long, a whole new kind of business appeared in Idaho: wine tour companies. Professional conferences, wedding parties, family gatherings — any group of people who want to get outside, have some fun and drink some wine — can schedule tours guided by experts who know what they're doing.

"We taste the wines, we check it all out before we ever take anybody out there," said Kathy Johnson, who runs Winery Seekers Wine Tours out of Boise. "And then, based upon what they like, we can say, 'Hey, did you ever hear of this winery?'"

They don't even have to leave the comfort of an urban environment if they don't want to. They can land at the airport and go straight into downtown or Garden City. There's plenty of variety right there.

But what's great about Treasure Valley's wine industry is that the rural side is just a short drive away — within 30 minutes of Boise's city limits are vineyards covering hundreds upon hundreds of acres.

So what can visiting wine connoisseurs expect? More than they might in other wine-producing regions, Johnson said. They won't just taste wines — although they'll do that, too — they'll have opportunities to meet the people who make it all happen.

Dolsby said she'd love to see Idaho's wine industry become a primary destination for out-of-towners. It's not quite there yet, she said, but it's becoming increasingly popular for those who arrive for other reasons.

Sometimes it's built right in to a group's planned festivities, like a bachelorette party out for a unique experience. Other times it's something fun for a visiting professional association to do on their down time. Or maybe it's a way to relax after a whitewater rafting excursion. Whatever the case, it's there, and it's convenient.

"The culture is changing, not just in Idaho but across the United States," Dolsby said. "People want to go wine tasting. They want to go touring, so all these things spawned from it, the good restaurants, the hotels. It all breeds around these activities."

According to an economic impact study done in 2008, the wine industry brought \$73 million and created 625 jobs, Dolsby said. The wine commission is currently doing another study, and with a stronger economy and nearly twice as many wineries, she said she hopes the new numbers will reflect that growth.

"\$73 million is a lot of money for a relatively small industry to be bringing into the state," she said. "It has a trickle-down effect. That's why you really do want to have a wine industry in your state if you can."

And convenience is the name of the game in southwestern Idaho. Those who don't want to venture outside the urban environment don't have to. But those who do don't have to go far.

"The Boise area is so unique. It has everything," Johnson said. "If you want to go to the museums, if you want to walk the greenbelt, it's just a great experience. People get quite a view of what Boise is and what Idaho has to offer. That's what we're all about. We want to show them a great time and we want to bring people back and grow our industry."

Wine making may be Idaho agriculture's biggest tourism draw, but it's by no means the only one.

The southwestern corner of the state is also home to mint distilleries, beer breweries, pumpkin patches and any number of businesses willing to give the public a behind-the-scenes look at their operation, Caldwell Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Theresa Hardin said.

And it's not just about sightseeing. Some farms will let visitors participate directly in the operation.

"There are some farms just getting involved with allowing people to pick crops or have dinners at their places," Hardin said. "There's a lavender farm in Nampa where you can tour the farm and then buy lavender products, soaps and lotions and a number of different things from that farm."

It's not only a whole new moneymaking opportunity for farmers, it's an opportunity for visitors to see where their food comes from, something urban dwellers may otherwise rarely even think about.

It does take a special commitment on the part of the grower, however. Dale Jeffers, vineyard manager at the Sawtooth and Skyline vineyards in Canyon County, acknowledges the benefit of agritourism to the industry and to the state, but he doesn't participate directly.

"We'll help if a winery wants to bring a group out," Jeffers said. "I'll definitely work with them on that, or just give permission. A lot of times they just want to know if they can bring a busload of people out and say, 'Here's where we get our grapes, this is why our wines are great.'"

Hardin agrees. Not all growers have the time, resources or commitment to cater to tourists, but they still benefit from the increased publicity, awareness and education agritourism brings.

"We would love to see more of agritourism, because it does educate people," she said. "But it also gives people a whole different aspect of life in the country."