

TTB establishes Eagle Foothills AVA for Idaho wine industry

By Eric Degerman, November 25, 2015



3 Horse Ranch Vineyards, established in 2002 north of Eagle, Idaho, spans 46 acres and is the largest planting in the new Eagle Foothills American Viticultural Area. (Photo by Eric Degerman/Great Northwest Wine)

EAGLE, Idaho – Martha Cunningham helped establish her vineyard more than a decade ago, but the Eagle Foothills remains the frontier of the Idaho wine industry.

This morning, however, it begins to make headlines throughout U.S. wine industry. The Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) established the Eagle Foothills American Viticultural Area – the first AVA entirely within Idaho’s borders.

Cunningham, co-owner of 3 Horse Ranch Vineyards and self-described “honest-to-goodness housewife,” made it happen as the primary author of the petition to the federal government.

“I can hardly talk. My mind is gone,” Cunningham told Great Northwest Wine. “It’s exciting. It’s amazing. It’s wonderful.”

The Eagle Foothills becomes the first sub-AVA of the Snake River Valley, and its 49,815 acres makes it twice the size of the Lake Chelan AVA in Washington state. It’s also the second AVA established this year in the Pacific Northwest, following the still-controversial Rocks District of Milton-Freewater in February.

“I’m just thrilled we have a new AVA,” said Moya Dolsby, executive director of the Idaho Grape Growers and Wine Producers Commission. “This puts Idaho on the map again and serves as validation that yes, we are a recognized grape-growing region. There aren’t a ton of acres out there, but hopefully there will be in the future.”

According to the news release, “TTB is issuing this regulation in response to a petition submitted on behalf of local grape grower and vintners. TTB designates viticultural areas to allow vintners to better describe the origin of their wines and to allow consumers to better identify wines they may purchase.”

Climate expert Greg Jones assists with petition

Greg Jones, a professor at Southern Oregon University and recognized as one of the world’s leading figures in climate research for viticulture, assisted Cunningham on the petition along with Boise State University’s Clyde “C.J.” Northrup, a geosciences professor and aspiring winemaker.

They supported the Eagle Foothills petition as a grape-growing region because of the influence of nearby Prospect Peak at 4,874 feet in elevation and the granite pebbles mixed with volcanic ash/sandy loam as a result of Ancient Lake Idaho.

“No. 1, the landscape is so unique from everything around it,” Jones said. “The climate is clearly unique because of the drainage flow of the air that comes from the hills in the area around it. And I think the boundary was fairly easily definable. I think it makes sense.”

The establishment in 2007 of the Snake River Valley AVA, which shares a portion of its western boundary with Oregon, continues to be viewed as the watershed moment for the Idaho wine industry in terms of sales, marketing and reputation. Cunningham and her husband, Gary, have little trouble selling the wines crafted by their award-winning winemaker Greg Koenig. In fact, 80 percent of their 3 Horse Ranch Vineyards wines are sold beyond Idaho's borders, so marketing their 12,000-case brand was not the driving force behind the petition.

Instead, the goal is to inspire others, she said.

"In a broader sense, I'm hopeful that this will encourage other areas of the state to craft petitions for their own unique spot," Cunningham said. "The Sunnyslope deserves its own AVA, too. The Snake River Valley is so vast and certainly diverse enough. I see no reason for others not to follow."

2014 Syrah will be first bottle with Eagle Foothills AVA

That's not to say Cunningham won't use the new AVA as an opportunity to promote the Eagle Foothills. She manages the 3 Horse Ranch Vineyards tasting room in the cottage surrounded by their vineyards and has lined up print advertisements in three publications, a campaign that starts Thanksgiving weekend. She's also considering a new video production.

And she's already putting the finishing touches on the label for what will be the first wine to use the new AVA – the 3 Horse Ranch Vineyards 2014 Single Vineyard Syrah.

"It will be coming out in the spring with the Eagle Foothills AVA on it," Cunningham said. "We made 400 cases of that wine. I can't submit the label for approval until 30 days after the AVA has been established. That will be Dec. 28, and I will be all ready to push the send button."

There's no doubt the Eagle Foothills, despite global climate change, has been established on the outer rim of viticultural viability. Winter events have limited or eliminated the 2013 and 2015 harvests of 3 Horse Ranch Vineyards.

At this point, there are no signs on the horizon that irrigation for vines will be a concern, Cunningham said. Her fear, though, is that the best vineyard sites in the Eagle Foothills will be consumed by housing and commercial development.

"I know that the big planned development for out here, Spring Valley Ranch, has a large piece of land set aside for vineyard," she said. "It would be right in the middle of the AVA near Highway 55 and Highway 16."

69 acres of vineyard in Eagle Foothills AVA

At this point, there are a mere 69 acres of vineyard planted in the AVA, and 3 Horse Ranch Vineyard



Martha Cunningham, who graduated from the University of California-Davis with a degree in physical education, calls herself "an honest-to-goodness housewife." The co-owner of 3 Horse Ranch Vineyards wrote the petition for the Eagle Foothills American Viticultural Area in Idaho, which is the first sub-AVA of the Snake River Valley. (Photo by Eric Degerman/Great Northwest Wine)

is the largest at 46 acres. The high point of the Cunninghams' vineyard registers 2,912 feet elevation.

"Someone reading about this on the East Coast or in Europe is going to think that we're in the Wild West out here," Cunningham said. "It's different than everything else around, and what's kind of cool is the animals are still here. We have mule deer. There's a herd of antelope down the road, a huge flock of turkeys and badger. I hope that Eagle as a community embraces the idea and puts some thought into the development."



Sangiovese vines dance in the breeze at Witte Vineyard, a 3-acre site owned by Dr. John Witte near Eagle, Idaho. (Photo by Eric Degerman/Great Northwest Wine)

Cunningham praised not only the collaboration with the scientists Jones and Northrup, but also Karen Thornton, AVA Program Manager within the TTB Regulations and Rulings Division in Washington, D.C.

"She's been wonderful in leading me through the process," Cunningham said.

It wasn't all smooth sailing. Cunningham's petition was accepted as perfected by the TTB on her second attempt. Initially, Cunningham filed to use the name of Willow Creek Idaho.

"The name evidence provided in the petition did not sufficiently demonstrate that the region is known by that name," the TTB explained.

In hindsight, Thornton did Cunningham a favor by rejecting that name. The town of Eagle and the surrounding community rank as some of the hottest real estate in Idaho, in part because of its bucolic feel while still just a 30-minute commute to downtown Boise.

"They were super helpful. I gave her a list of ideas for alternative names, which she helped with," Cunningham said. "I was able to come up the name evidence very quickly, rewrite and re-submit the petition within 48 hours.

"It's a lengthy process and the TTB is busy with lots of projects, but I never felt like people were putting roadblocks in front of me," she added. "I felt like I was being encouraged all along the way."

And the 60-day window for public commenting on Cunningham's petition closed June 15 without any debate.

Idaho Wine Commission embraces Eagle Foothills AVA

Dolsby left the Washington State Wine Commission in 2008 to take over the Idaho Wine Commission. That was the year after the establishment of the Snake River Valley AVA, so the Eagle Foothills AVA is the first during her watch.

"I love looking at the wild animals when I drive out there, including the antelope," she said. "There's the huge development that's planned and the area is growing, so what we're going to see in the next 20 years will be pretty impressive."

Ironically, there are problems with the other AVA petition involving Idaho. The proposed Lewis-

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Clark Valley AVA involves two states — Washington and Idaho — but the ongoing debate involves removing about 57,000 acres from the Columbia Valley AVA. That would require winemaker/grower Rick Wasem of Basalt Cellars in Clarkston, Wash., to use Lewis-Clark Valley, rather than the well-known Columbia Valley AVA, on the label of his wines, including those made using fruit from his estate vineyard.

Public commenting on the Lewis-Clark petition closed June 15 after 33 of the 35 statements came in favor of establishment. However, the TTB chose to revisit the petition and created a second 30-day commenting period. That closes Saturday, Nov. 27.

Meanwhile, Martha Cunningham will be raising a special toast on Thanksgiving.

“We’re having lots of friends and neighbors coming over for dinner, so there will be a huge celebration,” she said. “We will have 2011 and 2012 Syrah-Mourvèdre with the barbecued turkey, along with some Pinot Gris.”

