

# "Texas wines find their place in the sun": George Fuermann and the Early History of the Texas Wine Industry

By Maria R. D. Corsi

George Fuermann, a columnist for the *Houston Post*, is perhaps best remembered as the man who helped bring fine wine appreciation to Houston. In his weekly column "Wine Talk," which ran from 1984 to 1995, Fuermann educated Houstonians about wine history, traditions, and industry trends. A regular topic featured in the column, and one about which he felt particularly passionate, was the Texas wine industry. A big proponent and defender of Texas wine, Fuermann provided a unique insight into the early years of winemaking in Texas. By telling the stories of Texas winemakers, he brought Houstonians' attention to this upstart industry, helping to fuel its growth.

At the time his column appeared, the Texas wine industry was comparatively young, with Fuermann dating the state's modern era of professional winemaking to 1975. Unlike the other more famous and better-regarded wine-producing regions in the United States, Texas has only one historic winery, Val Verde Winery at Del Rio, founded in 1883. In 1975 it remained the only bonded winery in the state, and vineyard acreage remained low, at only twenty-five acres. A year later, however, Texas saw its first new winery since Prohibition, Llano Estacado Winery located in the High Plains region.

Llano Estacado has roots that go back to the mid-1950s, when Robert Reed, a horticulture professor at Texas Tech University, planted discarded vine cuttings in his backyard. In 1973 together with his colleague Clinton McPherson, he established a wine lab at the university. Two years later they started Llano Estacado with a group of investors. In 1977 the winery produced 600 cases of its first vintage. By 1983 Llano Estacado's production was at 14,000 cases and at the beginning of the 1990s production had increased almost five fold, with 68,000 cases released to the market. Growth continued apace, so that by 1992 the winery expected to produce and sell 75,000 cases, with 90 percent of it slated for the Texas market. In 1990 Fuermann praised Llano Estacado as "one of the state's



The logo for George Fuermann's weekly column, "Wine Talk," which ran in the *Houston Post* from 1984-1995.

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few distinguished wineries."<sup>1</sup>

Part of the reason for the early success of Llano Estacado lies in the winery's constant state of organized flux, as winemaker Dan Brady explained to Fuermann over lunch at Tony's, a popular Houston fine dining establishment, in 1992. Although blush wine led Llano's production for many years, the winery changed its focus in 1990, and cabernet and chardonnay became the top varietals. Fuermann saw this shift as "a tribute to the winery's maturity."<sup>2</sup>

Another Texas winery willing to experiment with new varietals was Fall Creek Vineyards, which Susan and Ed Auler started in 1975 after returning from a trip to France. As Ed explained to Fuermann, "I looked up at Clos

de Vougeot [in Burgundy], and thought: We have limestone and sandy loam near a body of water on our ranch. Why can't we do that?"<sup>3</sup> Their first crush was in 1979, when they produced 350 cases of three wines, two from French-American hybrid vines. As the initial wines they produced were rather indifferent, the Aulers decided to start over in 1982. They removed the hybrid vines and planted *vitis vinifera* instead, which Fuermann described as the "traditional European varieties that give table wines their dimensions and distinctions."<sup>4</sup> Sixteen years after they got their start, their initial half-acre vineyard had grown to sixty-five acres, and they had produced ten vintages. In 1990 the winery made 14,000 cases and sold every bottle it made, some of them as far away as New York City.

Perhaps fitting for a vineyard that got its own start as an experiment, Fall Creek gained early renown for experimenting with a little-known varietal, carnelian. The University of California at Davis developed carnelian, which produces a light, fragrant red wine, for hot climates. Fuermann gleefully reported to his readers that after tasting Fall Creek's carnelian, the dean of viticulture for Fresno State, a leading California wine school, told Auler, "This damn grape has finally found its home!"<sup>5</sup> Wine critics agreed. Robert Lawrence Balzer, writing in

*Travel Holiday*, said that the wine exceeded all expectations, and California critic Bob Thompson called the 1987 vintage a “remarkably distinguished and stylish wine...the most intriguing Texas red I have ever come across.”<sup>6</sup> Such high praise no doubt encouraged many Houstonians to try this wine for themselves, with Fuermann helpfully listing the places in Houston where Fall Creek wines could be found.

Texas wines really started gaining traction and national credibility in the mid-1980s. In 1986 Gerald Asher, wine editor of *Gourmet* magazine, wrote about his initial and unfounded skepticism of Texas wines. Fuermann argued that Asher’s article gave Texas wines “their first national focus of importance,” bringing credibility to “what many on the West and East coasts had scoffed at without even tasting.”<sup>7</sup>

Likely what drew the attention of so prominent a wine writer was the fact that Texas wines were beginning to win prestigious awards. As Fuermann was thrilled to report, in that year, Llano Estacado won a double gold medal at the San Francisco Fair and Exposition’s National Wine Competition for its 1984 Chardonnay, one of only eleven double gold medals awarded that year. It competed against 370 other chardonnays to come out on top, an impressive feat for any winery, let alone one from so maligned a wine state as Texas. Another Texas winery, Pheasant Ridge, won a gold medal at the same competition for its 1983 Cabernet Sauvignon, further adding to the credibility of the wine industry in the state. The following year Messina Hof Winery became the third Texas winery to win an important award when it received a gold medal for its 1986 Chenin Blanc at the Atlanta International Wine Festival. This was one of only forty-five golds awarded to U.S. wineries, and more impressively, one of only ninety-six gold medals awarded to the 1,806 wineries that entered internationally. As Fuermann boasted, Texas wines continued to impress skeptics such as Karen MacNeil, a New York wine consultant. In Texas to judge a Texas wine competition, she was asked her opinion of Texas wines following the judging. Her response? “I was prepared for sagebrush juice, but was bowled over



*Llano Estacado Winery, located in Lubbock, was founded in 1975, the first new winery in Texas since Prohibition.*

by the quality of Texas wines.”<sup>8</sup>

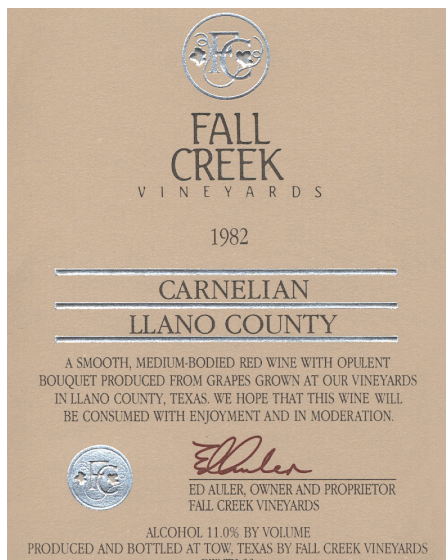
One of the big challenges for the industry was to get Texans to drink Texas wine, a necessity since little Texas wine was sold outside the state. The numbers were dismal in the early years. In 1985, for example, Texas wine represented less than two percent of the wine consumed in the state. Ten years later that figure had not changed. Nonetheless, the total volume of wine produced by Texas wineries had increased exponentially. In 1982, the first year for which data exists, Texas produced some 50,000 gallons of wine, but by 1986 the state’s wineries had produced 750,000 gallons, a fifteen-fold increase in just four years. This increase in production can be partially explained by the parallel expansion of Texas wineries, increasing from just one winery in 1975 to twenty by 1986. Five years later, in 1993, Texas wine sales had doubled and the number of wineries had increased to twenty-seven, further fueling industry growth.

George Fuermann and the Houston restaurant scene did much to help the fledgling Texas wine industry expand its presence in the city and gain credibility. In the 1980s Houston had a proliferation of food and wine societies as well as wine tastings and vintner dinners. As Fuermann explained in his column, wine tastings are generally stand-up affairs, with wine drunk over cheese and fruit. In contrast, vintner dinners feature a seated dinner at an upscale restaurant, allowing the winery to showcase its best wines over a fine meal. In exchange for a restaurant hosting the dinner, the winery contributes its wines and the presence of either its winemaker or owner. Regularly featured in “Wine Talk,” venerable Houston restaurants of the period such as Joe Mannke’s Rotisserie for Beef and Bird and The Confederate House hosted many such events. Bill Edge of The Confederate House also organized more unusual outings, such as a wine train to Galveston, a wine hayride at Red Deer Farms, and the Bayou Belle Wine and Food Cruise, featuring Fall Creek Vineyards. Tastings proved so popular that some restau-

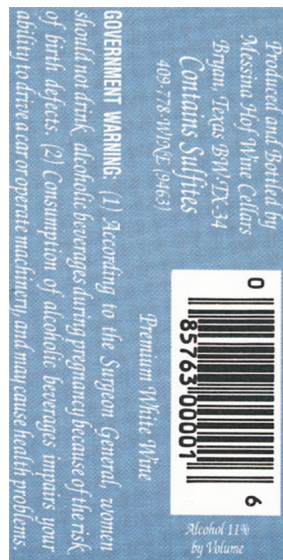


*Fall Creek Vineyards, located in the Texas Hill Country, portrayed on a 1980s postcard.*





*The wine label for Fall Creek's 1982 Carnelian. The winery received acclaim from viticulturists and wine writers alike for this varietal.*



*The wine label for Messina Hof's 1991 Chenin Blanc. Messina Hof became the third Texas winery to win a prestigious award when it received a gold medal for its 1986 Chenin Blanc at the Atlanta International Wine Festival.*



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*Messina Hof*

1991 Texas  
Chenin Blanc

*Paul Bonarrigo*

rants, such as Chris Tripoli's Nicole's Restaurant, even began hosting vintner luncheons, with five wines served with a five-course lunch. Fuermann, as a leader in the Houston wine scene, routinely attended these events and reported on them to his readers. They were enormously successful, averaging between 150 and 200 attendees, and no doubt Fuermann's regular mention of them helped spur their popularity.

Because Houston was the largest wine market in the South, it is no surprise that winemakers frequently visited the city. Fuermann often sat down with winery representatives when they visited, and their interviews were a regular feature of his column, further exposing Houstonians to the history and merits of Texas wines. Houston restaurants showed their support by featuring Texas wines on their wine lists, and Fuermann let his

readers know which restaurants had the best selections of Texas wines. Throughout the 1980s restaurants such as The Confederate House, The Houston Club, and the Rotisserie for Beef and Bird all helped support the Texas wine industry through their extensive Texas wine lists.

The history of the first two decades of the Texas wine industry comes to life through the writings of George Fuermann. Although Texas wines were met with initial skepticism following the establishment of the first wineries in the 1970s, by the middle of the following decade Texas vintners were winning over critics and consumers alike. Prestigious awards and reviews in national publications helped to bring credibility to Texas wines, and local restaurants helped bring visibility through numerous wine tastings and vintner dinners. Growth in the amount of wine produced, the number of wineries, and vineyard acreage remained robust throughout this period, so that by the mid-1990s, the Texas wine industry as a whole seemed poised for continued success. 🍷

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*Bobby and Jennifer Cox of Pheasant Ridge Winery, located in Lubbock. One of the oldest wineries in the state, Pheasant Ridge garnered national attention when it won a gold medal at the San Francisco Fair and Exposition's National Wine Competition for its 1983 Cabernet Sauvignon.*

The Hospitality Industry Archives holds a number of collections related to the Houston food and beverage industry such as the Les Amis D'Escoffier Society of Houston Collection, the George Fuermann Wine Talk Collection, and the Houston Restaurant Association Women's Auxiliary Collection. For more information, visit [www.uh.edu/hilton-college/About/hospitality-industry-archives](http://www.uh.edu/hilton-college/About/hospitality-industry-archives).