



Oro Loco and Rojo Loco are two of the wine selections at La Viña Winery.

(Right) Weathered oak barrels, once used for aging wine, now rest in the courtyard at La Viña.



For most, thoughts of the El Paso area bring to mind images of mountains, desert and the cacti and succulents that eke out a hardscrabble existence in the Chihuahuan Desert. One might picture the green of mesquite and cottonwood trees, even, but certainly not grape vines. However, to the surprise of many, the wine business is alive and well in the Mesilla Valley.

A short trip up New Mexico Highway 28 — where lush, green vineyards spring forth from parched desert soil — offers the wine enthusiast several chances to experience a taste of the region. Zin Valle Vineyards, La Viña Winery, St. Claire Bistro and Winery and Luna Rossa Winery stand ready to give visitors a glimpse into the area's wine industry.

Zin Valle Vineyards

Zin Valle Vineyards, the first winery drivers will meet on the highway, opened its doors in 2004.

"My husband always had a strong interest in wine," said Kathi Poulos, who, along with her husband Victor, owns the winery. "Zin Valle really developed out of a hobby, an interest." Victor still works full-time as a lawyer, Poulos noted, while she left her job as a teacher to work full time at the winery.

In 2000, the Poulos family purchased the 10 acres of land in Canutillo on which Zin Valle, the only Texas winery on the Highway 28 tour, sits. They prepared the land and planted 850 zinfandel vines. In 2003, the vineyard produced a crop of mature, quality zinfandel grapes.

"Once we knew we had a harvestable grape for making wine, we got started," Poulos said. The family went on to build the winery and tasting room and plant a second vineyard for white wines.

"The Mission area is the oldest wine-producing region in the country, so we knew it could be done," Poulos said. "The trick is to choose the varieties that you plant, to make sure they're going to grow well in this climate."

Zin Valle grows three grape varieties on four acres of land: zinfandel, malvasia bianca and gewürztraminer. The winery imports some of its grapes, types that don't fare as well in the desert soil.

Currently, Zin Valle offers an average of 10 different types of wine, a number that depends heavily on how well the previous year's grape harvest produces. Last year, the Rio Grande's flooding wreaked havoc on the winery's production.

"We lost all of our harvest last year," Poulos said. "The flooding helped the soil, but the fruit didn't ripen. There wasn't enough sun. We were getting ready to put out the bird nets, and we couldn't get out in the vineyard to do it. What the birds didn't get rotted on the vine."

Despite the challenges, Poulos said she sees the work as extremely rewarding.

"Once you get started, it really is fun," she explained. "You get to watch the plant mature, watch the fruit go through the winemaking process, and see the end result in the bottle. I don't think I'll ever get tired of that."

That end result — the Rising Star line of wines — continues to sell better every year, Poulos said.

"Last year, we were pushing 2,000 cases in sales," she said. "Production has increased steadily, but Zin Valle is a boutique winery. We're never looking to go to the mass market and mass production. Our sales are almost all through retail in the tasting room."

Zin Valle's wines also do well at competitions, with the Rising Star Malvasia Bianca recently garnering a dou-

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ble gold medal at a wine competition in Houston.

In addition to wine tastings, Zin Valle schedules several events throughout the year.

"We have events throughout the year, catered by different restaurants," Poulos noted. Upcoming events include the Bastille Day Run, slated for July 14. The run, hosted in conjunction with El Paso-based Spira Footwear and sponsored by Tents and Events, Up and Running, The Magic Pan and EP Fitness, benefits the El Paso Humane Society. For more information on the run, visit www.runelpaso.com or call (915) 478-5663.

A strong supporter of the El Paso Humane Society, Zin Valle also donates to the society \$1 from every bottle of its Man's Best Friend Merlot sold.

Zin Valle also hosts a biweekly concert series, Musical Sundays at Zin Valle Vineyards. The shows take place

from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. and feature Julio Ortiz or James Springer. Shows scheduled include a date on Sunday and shows May 13, May 27, June 10, June 24, July 8, July 22, Aug. 5, and Aug. 19.

Zin Valle offers a wine club, restricted to Texas residents only, that up to three times a year automatically ships selections to wine club members. The winery's Barrel Room can be reserved for private parties and functions.

The Zin Valle Vineyards tasting room, located at 7315 Highway 28 in Canutillo, is open from noon to 5 p.m. Friday through Monday, or by appointment Tuesday and Thursday. Visitors may taste samples of up to five wines for free. For more information, contact Zin Valle at 877-4544.

La Viña Winery

Just three miles up the highway, La Viña Winery sits on 44 acres of Mesilla Valley land. The oldest winery in New Mexico, La Viña has produced wine since 1977. The current (and third) owners, Ken and Denise Stark, purchased the business, but not the land on which it stood, in 1993.

"When we got into the winemaking business, we just kind of stopped and said to ourselves, 'We're 40 years old, we're educated; what do we want to do?'" Denise Stark said. "(Ken and I) both had a great fondness for food and wine. We started looking for Nirvana."

"We were going to set up in Albuquerque," Denise explained. "It took us a while to realize that our market was not in Albuquerque, but in El Paso."

The Starks bought the land on which La Viña now stands, in La Union, N.M., in 1998, and began selling La Viña wines in 2000.

"Owning and running La Viña is a venture of love, really," Denise noted. "When I say that, people tend to ask if it's a romantic love or love of good food and wine, and to that I say, 'Yes.' It's a major commitment."

Still, there's nothing like being your own boss.

"I don't think there's anything in the world like working for yourself. It's remarkable," Denise said. "But the best part about owning La Viña is working together with Ken."

Ken handles the winemaking duties, while Denise takes on the business and marketing aspects of La Viña.

The work isn't in making the wine, said Denise — it's in making good wine.

"It's very natural for juice to turn into wine to turn into vinegar," she explained. "It's the winemaker's job to stop that process somewhere between juice and vinegar and produce a drinkable product. We do a lot of tweaking to make it good, better, best."

"Winemaking is a very creative business," Ken said. "Every winemaker has his own style. We hope there's a style that fits every consumer, but that just isn't practical. Thank goodness there are enough people out there who like my style!"

"You don't have to compromise your style as long as you make good wine," he continued. "If you make good wine, people are going to want to drink it."

Winemaking is a lot of work, Ken noted.

"Just like a cook can taste tomato sauce and taste the oregano and other herbs and spices in it, and know what it needs more of and what's just right, a winemaker's job