

Wine

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is to take the things you can do to change the wine — literally, hundreds of things — and make it the best it can be,” he said. “It’s part knowledge, and part physical work.”

“There have been times that I worked over a hundred hours in a week,” Ken continued. There’s a lot of pressure, and it requires that you give a lot extra. You have a small window of opportunity while the wine is fermenting, and it’s during that period that you can most affect the taste.

“There are so many things you can’t control,” he added. “You can’t control the weather, for example. But if we were to have a perfect year, with perfect weather, and a perfect crop, and I did my job perfectly...It would be like hitting the lottery. It would just be time to stop.”

The winemaking process begins with the grape, which dictates the quality of wine produced, Denise said.

“Last year, we had abundant rains, and we couldn’t get into our vineyard to spray our vines,” Denise related. “We lost over half our crop to mold and mildew. The

good news is that we did get half of it, but it was not quite the quality we would have preferred.

“We’re looking for a better crop this year,” she continued. “Unless there’s a severe rainy season, or something else drastic happens, we should have one.”

All of the grapes used in La Viña wines are grown on-premises. Irrigation and choosing the right grapes are the keys to growing wine grapes in New Mexico, Stark said.

“Grapevines don’t require a lot of water, or constant care,” Stark said. “Our irrigation system uses water from the river, supplemented by water from a well on our property. We just received a grant from the state of New Mexico to install a drip irrigation system, which should be even more efficient.”

“Choosing the right grape is also important,” she continued. “For example, a type of grape that grows beautifully here, but won’t produce fruit, is sauvignon blanc. We tried planting it, and the vine grows like crazy, but it has yet to produce grapes.”

A change in the pruning methods used on the sauvignon blanc vines has the Starks hopeful it will soon produce a harvestable crop.

Once the grapes have matured, seasonal workers harvest the grapes by hand, preferably at night. The grapes are chilled and go through a destemmer/crusher, which produces a product called “must.” To make red wine, the must is fermented; for white, the must is pressed for juice, which is then fermented.

Stark said the fermentation process takes around 10 days to 2 weeks, during which the winemaker tests the product to check for alcohol content and remaining sugars. The winemaker, Ken Stark, also compares the newly-made products with last year’s vintages, and works to maintain consistency through the years.

“We keep back bottles of every wine we make, to try and maintain consistency in our products,” Stark noted.

After fermentation, the product can go into bottles, storage tanks, or toasted oak barrels for further aging.



This year’s vines at La Viña are growing well after a rough season of too much rain last year.



Kathi and Victor Poulos, who own Zin Valle Vineyards, pour a sample of one of Zin Valle’s Rising Star wines for a guest at the winery’s tasting room.

The winery now produces 23 grape varieties.

“We’re almost experimental in the number of grapes we grow here at La Viña,” Stark said. “It’s almost like, will this grape grow in New Mexico, and we find out here. The sauvignon blanc was just something we wanted to try and make, so we planted the vine and now we’re trying to make it work.”

The types of wine available at La Viña vary, too.

“It just depends on what’s in the bottle at the moment,” Stark said.

La Viña’s most popular wines, according to Stark, are Rojo Loco, the “Crazy Red” blend of ruby cabernet and zinfandel, and La Dulce Viña, a sparkling Muscat. Most of the wines enjoy a good following, but one, a brut champagne, “just didn’t work out,” said Stark.

The winery bottles about 4,000 to 5,000 cases per year, and Stark estimates last year’s sales at around 3,000 cases.

La Viña also hosts several events throughout the year: the upcoming Spring

Blues and Jazz Festival, scheduled for April 28-29, an old-fashioned country picnic and open house on July 4, and the Harvest Festival and Grape Stomp in October. The winery also offers a summer concert series, Music on the Patio, on Sundays from 1 to 5 p.m. Upcoming dates for the Music on the Patio series include May 13, May 27, June 3, June 24, July 8, July 22, Aug. 5, Aug. 19; Sept. 9, Sept. 23, Sept. 30, Oct. 7 and Oct. 28. Guests for these events are encouraged to bring a picnic and enjoy an afternoon of food, wine and music.

The winery’s grounds and patio are available for private parties and functions.

La Viña’s tasting room, located at 4201 S. Highway 28 in La Union, is open Thursday through Tuesday from noon to 5 p.m. Wine tastings cost \$3 and include a souvenir wine glass and samples of up to six wines. A tour of the winery, available by appointment, takes place at 11:30 a.m. La Viña is closed on Wednesdays. For

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