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Wash. wineries now number more than 600

By SHANNON DININNY
Associated Press Writer

Just 10 years ago, Washington's wine industry was the darling of agriculture, a growing niche industry with a loyal fan base for its 160 wineries.

Today, Washington still can't touch California when it comes to wine production — or even Washington's top crop, apples, when it comes to being the agriculture king. But as of last month, Washington has licensed 602 wineries, marking a nearly 300 percent increase in just a decade.

"It's great news," said Robin Pollard, executive director of the Washington Wine Commission. "The natural evolution of our industry, the growth, is indicative of the fact that many people recognize the quality of the grapes that we grow here in Washington, that then can be made into world-class wines.

"We've had a lot of new additions to the family, so to speak," Pollard said.

Valued at about \$3 billion annually, Washington's wine industry has seen steady growth in the past two decades. The number of wine grape plantings increased from 24,000 acres in 1999 to an estimated 33,000 this year.

Wine grapes were the No. 11 Washington crop in 2006, the last year for which official agricultural statistics are available.

The numbers trail far behind California, with 2,687 wineries, 523,000 acres of grapes and an industry valued at just short of \$52 billion, according to the California Wine Institute.

But growth in Washington's industry is expected to continue, said Vicky Scharlau, executive director of the Washington Association of Wine Grape Growers.

"There's been a nice offset between supply and demand," she said. "The growers have been very cautious, and we have been very diligent in the message to growers that unless you have a contract with a winery, we don't recommend planting more acreage."

According to the state Liquor Control Board, the 600th winery license was awarded Feb. 10 to Bridge Press Cellars of Spokane. Since then, two other licenses have been awarded, bringing the total to 602: Rockwell Brown Wines of North Bend and Tru Cellars of Walla Walla.

Bridge Press plans to crush its first fruit — likely merlot or cabernet sauvignon from the Walla Walla Valley — this year. The first vintage won't be out for at least a couple of years, said Melody Padrta, who started the winery with her husband.

She also said they plan to stay small, starting at maybe 100 cases of each.

"A lot of the wineries have started out that way, and they have grown by leaps and bounds," Padrta said. "I'd like to stay small. I don't know that I want to devote that much time to it. Because then it's like a job and it's not fun anymore."

The next challenge for the state will be to market all those wines during an economic downturn.

Gov. Chris Gregoire, in Washington, D.C., recently for a banquet of the nation's governors, already suggested to first lady Michelle Obama that she serve Washington wines at the White House. Industry leaders and new state Department of Agriculture Director Dan Newhouse, a wine grape grower, will continue to market Washington wines, Gregoire said.

"This is great news for the state of Washington," the governor said of topping the 600 mark. "Despite the national recession, our efforts to diversify our state's economy are paying off. I applaud those entrepreneurs and small business owners who are working with our grape growers to produce some of the finest wines available."

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