Oklahoma isn’t traditionally known for being a wine producing state, but you’d be surprised.

By Tara Lynn Thompson

They come to life in the heat, and as the spring sun lengthens into summer, the tidy rows of plants at Whispering Vines shake off their foggy-headed sleep. It’s show time.

Vineyard manager Dean Riesen and operations manager Doreen Riesen take to the earth, ready to greet, prune, hedge and eventually harvest the shy Chardonnay, the moxie Zinfandel and all their European cousins from the vines grown at this west Tulsa vineyard.

By late August, as the grapes have plumped into their full glory, nature has also awakened into a blossoming tirade of bottomless greens. It’s absolutely picturesque. The panoramic view could be Italy of Napa Valley or Portugal. But surprise: it’s Oklahoma.

“We have the ability to grow quality fruit to ferment into quality wine that can compete with any wine in the U.S.,” says Andrew Snyder, president of the Oklahoma Grape Growers and Wine Makers Association.

He isn’t kidding.

In blind taste tests, Oklahoma wines walk away winners. Snyder’s own grapes, lovingly reared at his Sand Hill Vineyards in Calumet, are running out of room on the mantle. His Cabernet, Riesling, Pinot Noir and American Sangiovese have brought home gold and silver medals in national and international competitions, including the America del Vino International Wine Competition and Taster’s Guild International Wine Competition.

Oklahoma isn’t yet a New Zealand, but then again, Snyder says. New Zealand was an Oklahoma just a decade ago. Timing is essential in the wine industry, and the state could be embarking on its time.

“It’s still in its infancy, but it’s just exploding left and right. I see some good things on the horizon,” says Capt. Dennis McGowan, winery wholesale division, ABLE Commission, concerning the Oklahoma wine industry.
Currently, Oklahoma has 55 wineries and 11 vineyards, a number slightly down from last year but perpetually renewing, McGowen says, describing the current mood as a “boom.”

The chameleon nature of Oklahoma weather, too finicky in areas for some fruit varieties, has sectioned the state wine industry into a grid of grape growing.

In southern Oklahoma, European-style vines called vitis vinifera, hard to pronounce and even more difficult to spell, flourish. The fruit produces the more commonly known wines, such as Chardonnays, Cabernets and Merlots.

The northern area of the state is the hotbed of hybrid vines, taking a walk on the wild side with the Norton grape and it’s French-American soul sisters. Even though it isn’t well known, Snyder says the vine’s smaller reputation does not dampen its flavor and appeal.

“The northern part of the state grows grapes people are not as familiar with, but nevertheless results in great wines,” Snyder says.

And grapes aren’t the only fruit being squished, fermented and bottled. Specialty wines, made from peaches, blackberries, strawberries and even watermelon – minus the rind and seeds – are produced in Oklahoma, says McGowen. Oklahoma wineries aren’t reinventing the wheel, but they are taking their turn giving it a spin.

Hoping to further Oklahoman’s wine knowledge, Oklahoma State University started the Viticulture Education Program in 2000 for grape growers, wine makers and wine drinkers. It isn’t a degreed course, but an informative support to a proliferating industry. If Oklahomans want to produce wine, then OSU, whose faculty has been studying grapes off and on for 100 years – wants to help, says Eric Stafne, assistant professor of fruit and nut crops extension, OSU-Stillwater.

“We are providing a baseline of information in hopes that they will take that information and apply it to their own situation...and have knowledge of what it takes to grow good grapes,” says Stafne.

The Viticulture Education Program is two-tiered, with units to be completed within a five-year time frame. The basic level, 12 units, provides the fundamentals of horticultural science with viticulture techniques. The advanced level, 16 units, adds on to those fundamentals while incorporating additional training, like marketing, sanitation and advanced irrigation.

“We hope (viticulture students) are walking out with sufficient knowledge and understanding of the basics of growing a vine,” Stafne says.

Many wineries and vineyards are seeing the fruition of their labor-intensive venture and becoming a presence in wine and liquor stores around the state. Even though many wineries must import certain grape varieties from out of state to offer a full spectrum of wines, the taste of home can always be found behind the “Oklahoma” label, which requires a minimum of 75 percent use of local fruit.

“There are a lot of business models out there. Some wineries import bulk wine –wine already made – and simply bottle it. Others grow some grapes and import others. And some proudly grow or purchase all Oklahoma grapes that produce their wines,” says Snyder, who is passionate about using only Oklahoma grapes in his wines. “We can turn this into one of the states you mention when talking about wine.”

Andrew Snyder, the president of the Oklahoma Grape Growers and Wine Makers Association and owner of Sand Hill Vineyards, believes Oklahoma could be the next big thing in American wine production.