

Central San Joaquin Valley boutique wineries growing

By Robert
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Kings River Winery- the latest boutique winery in the San Joaquin Valley gets off the ground in Sanger. Video: John Walker THEFRESNOBEE

Pouring it on

Three winemakers have plans for Sanger-area locations, joining the ranks of at least two dozen boutique wineries in the central San Joaquin Valley:

- **Kings River Winery**, grand opening Feb. 7-8; see below for details
- **Maréchal Vineyards**, owner Josh Marshall figures he's about one to two years away from opening
- **Ubick Vineyards**, owner Mike Ubick figures he's about two to three years away

With a view of the foothills in the distance and bordered by meticulously kept vineyards, Kings River Winery is the central San Joaquin Valley's newest spot for sipping carefully crafted wines.

The Sanger winery's well-appointed tasting room, advanced equipment and barrel room is the culmination of a nearly 10-year dream of farmer Bob Bagdasarian.

"I've always enjoyed wine and going to Napa, but I also wanted to someday make my own wine and take more control of my own destiny, instead of selling our grapes to someone else," Bagdasarian said.

Bagdasarian is following in the footsteps of other Valley winemakers whose numbers continue to grow as their wines gain greater acceptance from the public and wine judges. There are at least two dozen boutique wineries in Fresno and Madera counties. Two wineries opened in the last several months, Kings River Winery and Toca Madera Winery. Others are in the works.

"We are really growing in Fresno County, there is no doubt about that," said Debbie Milla, co-owner of Milla Vineyards that's celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. "And for us, growth is good, the more wineries we can produce, the more places there are for customers to visit."

For decades the Valley has been known as the workhorse of the wine industry, producing more tons of grapes per acre than any other region in the state. But unlike other wine-making regions, the Valley's grapes were used mostly in value-priced wines. That pattern began changing about 15 years ago, when enterprising grape growers and upstart wine makers launched their own wine-making ventures.

Milla Vineyards was among the early group of boutique wineries to open in Fresno County along with A. Nonini Winery and Engelmann Cellars. Bagdasarian said the time is ripe for more wineries to open, especially as interest in local products grows.

"We are getting better and better at making wine and we are seeing Fresno State's enology students looking at the boutique wine industry for jobs, instead of going to the big guys," Bagdasarian said.

Kings River Winery was able to lure one of those Fresno State enology department graduates. Winemaker Nick

DeHart said he had lots of options after graduating from Fresno State, including making wine in New Zealand and France. Attracted by the freedom to create wines of his liking, he stayed in the Valley, having worked at other local wineries, including Ramos Torres in Kingsburg.

“I saw the opportunity to make quality wine on a small level, and on a passionate level,” DeHart said. “You have tremendous control over the quality and the variables that go into making great wine. You don’t always have that freedom at larger wineries.”

A Sanger grand opening, and more in the works

Kings River Winery produces seven wines: pinot gris, chenin blanc, muscato, cabernet sauvignon, petite sirah, a late harvest reisling and a red grape blend called Apache red. Prices range from \$18 to \$24 a bottle. You can buy the wines at the winery, 4276 S. Greenwood Ave. just south of Sanger city limits; Peeve’s Local Market on the Fulton Mall; and The Market at Herndon and West avenues in northwest Fresno.

Kings River Winery is celebrating its grand opening on Feb. 7-8 from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day. The celebration coincides with the Twin Rivers Vintners Association’s Wine and Chocolate Lovers Weekend from noon to 5 p.m. each day. A collection of 13 wineries and breweries will host visitors at locations throughout Fresno County. Go to www.fresnocountywinejourney.com for details.

Two others have wines on local shelves now and are waiting for the right timing to open wineries in the Sanger area:

- Mike Ubick has been making wine for several years at Milla Vineyards under his own label Ubick Vineyards. He sells his wines at Peeve’s and Milla.

“Right now, we just don’t have enough wine to supply enough people,” Ubick said. “That’s why we need to build something so we can produce more and provide that to the public.”

Ubick, who favors fruit-forward and bold-flavored reds, is about two to three years away from opening his own winery.

- Josh Marshall is in “planning and jumping hoops” phase of his winery project. He is about one to two years away from opening Maréchal Vineyards in northeast Sanger. For now, Marshall makes his wine in Paso Robles and sells it at several locations, including Peeve’s, The Grape Tray (6023 N. Palm Ave., northwest Fresno), and Sam’s Italian Deli & Market on the corner of Clinton and First avenues in central Fresno.

“We are pretty excited about this project,” Marshall said. “We ship our wine grapes to lots of places throughout the state and out of the country. Now, it’s our turn to use the grapes we grow here and make great wine.”

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