

Finding Their Champion

ARE TEXAS WINES READY FOR THEIR CLOSE-UP?
BOBBY CHAMPION THINKS THEY ARE

by Anthony Head / photo by Kirk Weddle

Outside of the state, the world can be forgiven for not knowing that Texas is wine country. But it is the nation's fifth-largest wine-producer, which is why I find it strange that within the borders—and despite the fact that 95 percent of all Texas wine is consumed by Texans in Texas—there's still so much room to grow the culture, and so much of a need to get that famous Texan pride gathered into a groundswell behind Texas wines.

Because Texas has that need, Texas also has Bobby Champion. With a name like a superhero, Bobby Champion (it's fun to say, too) is the State Coordinator for Wine Marketing, an official post with the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA). He wants all y'all to know about Texas wines, but his tasks include convincing the wine industry as a whole that when the tide comes in, all the boats can float.

"We have an incredible amount of cooperation from the growers and winemakers, and lots of interaction between government agencies, university programs and the private industry. We just need more of them to take advantage of the resources we have," Bobby Champion tells me when we meet in June. Based in Austin, he's affable enough, and thoroughly committed to his position. "I have one of the best jobs in the state, no doubt about it, because [wine] is a young and dynamic industry here."

Dynamic? Certainly. But *young*? Hardly. Texas has a longer winemaking history than anywhere else in the country; its taproot dates back to the Spaniards making wine in the 1600s where El Paso stands today. Yes, Texas and wine go way back.

What Bobby Champion means when he says the industry is "young" is that the modern era of Texas wines began around 1970. Commercial viticulture was undertaken in earnest; even still,

the past four decades of growth have been so slow that when Bobby Champion took his job with the TDA in 2003, there were still only 42 wineries in the state.

"We're over 200 wineries now," Bobby Champion points out, adding that they're part of a \$1.35 billion industry that employs about 9,000 people. The recent growth spurt can be traced back to 2001, when legislators passed House Bill 892, "The Texas Wine Marketing Assistance Program," which originally earmarked \$500,000 for two years of wine marketing. Something must have gone right, because in 2005, the stipend increased to nearly five million.

So the industry is burgeoning, which means so is the TDA's mission. In its way, it's helping to develop the industry as a whole. Bobby Champion earned a horticultural degree from Texas Tech, so he understands the growers' side of things. Part of his budget includes grants to grape growers to increase acreage.

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When it comes to the marketing side of his desk, he admits the bulk of the work is overcoming one obstacle: "Perception is a problem—perception of quality. Great wines can be made here. We really want consistency of quality across the board. People need to get out and try some Texas wines and when it comes to my budget, I want to make sure every dollar spent is quantified."





The TDA produces wine guides and brochures, and it partners with the state tourism office on the eight registered wine trails. Social media are important, so the TDA created gotexanwine.org, where viewers can watch short WineCasts on the industry. I liked Kim McPherson's (McPherson Cellars, Lubbock) interview about lesser-known but potential gold-mine Texas varietals Viogner and Sangiovese.

After visiting four wineries, visitors can redeem the relatively new "passport," part of a program that rewards private tastings with wine accessories and such. "It was really developed for our in-state population, but we're finding that some of those redeeming the passports are out-of-state visitors," explains Bobby Champion.

According to some estimates, Texas is the second most popular wine destination in the country behind Napa/Sonoma. So whenever

national publications mention Texas as a wine country destination, it's always mentioned in conjunction with Napa/Sonoma. Bobby Champion says that will end: "Texas is unique. We need to just showcase Texas as *Texas*. Some day, with time, the comparisons to Napa will drop off."

On this day, Bobby Champion then joins a group of writers, sommeliers, and other interested oenophiles in a Texas Two-Sip. These are TDA-sponsored blind wine tastings, with Texas versus the world, regularly given to consumers and other interested oenophiles.

"We need to focus inside our state so Texans keep driving the popularity of Texas wines. Once that happens, everyone else will take notice," says Bobby Champion. And rest assured, Bobby Champion is ready to direct your attention to today's Texas wines. ■■

As State Coordinator for Wine Marketing, Bobby Champion directs the way to a bright future for Texas wines.