

# It's Not *ALL* About the Grape, But You Can't Have Wine Without It

by Mary Silveira

San Luis Obispo County is prominent for its proliferation of wine-producing grapes on the Central Coast—and their growth has dominated the county for the past 16 years. In 1987, wine grapes were sixth on the top-20 crops list, third in 1988 with a \$21,417,000 value and first in 1991 with \$34,172,000. Today, the 2007 Annual Crop Report lists the product at number one for the 16th year in a row, tapping in at \$141,674,000. Oh, what growth!

But, the industry did not make it this far just by the growing of the grape. The road to number one has taken a lot of ingenuity, stamina and stick-to-itiveness, with growers coming together in the industry to reach across the table and talk. That talk could have been generated by market demand, market issues, invasive pests and land fertile for the planting or by county planning and building.

The reasons for groups to gather together vary from North to South County and include the ability to market the product, bring good fruit to press and keep critters like the glassy-winged sharpshooter off vines. Recognition of industry concerns allowed practices to gel independently and to assume the democratic process of coming together to meet needs.

Several organizations have evolved from these needs, and members of each benefit bilaterally in the process. *Farmer & Rancher* looks at three organizations in this issue and will spotlight San Luis Obispo County Vintners Association and Central Coast Wine Growers Association in the February issue.

## Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance

Stacie Jacob, executive director for the past four years of Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance (PRWCA), shared what this organization was founded on and evolved into.

Promotion and recognition of grape growing and wine processing for more than 26,000 vineyard acres and 200 mid-size boutique wineries in this American Viticulture Area (AVA) of Paso Robles falls heavily and heartily on the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance.

"Our growing regions are really different in this area," says Jacob. "Our industry has tripled in size in the last decade. We focus on pro-

grams meaningful to our members. The ultimate goal is to create programs members incorporate into their own marketing plans and that directly impact their business success. We strive for results that our members can see.

"We are a 501(c)(6) nonprofit organization that operates as a business with no special government funding. And, our full time staff of seven, which includes me, executes a variety of local, regional and national branding programs dedicated to creating more awareness for the Paso Robles AVA."

The Wine Alliance 2009 program line-up includes a national Grand



Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance staff (front row, from left) Chris Taranto, Stacie Jacob, Gracie Rey; (back row, from left) Yanna Williams, Nicole Stonehocker, Meagan Callahan.

Tasting Tour visiting four markets—Los Angeles, Orange County, Chicago and San Antonio; three local festivals targeted to bring wine tourists to the region—Zinfandel Festival, Wine Festival and Harvest Wine Weekend; and CRAVE—a new event targeting younger wine consumers (under 30). Additional activities include national marketing/media relations—hosting wine buyers and national media; a new, expanded website using an interactive map tool that allows greater access to vineyards and tasting rooms; and a variety of educational programs for members to further their individual businesses.

“We bring in travel writers to experience our wine festivals and take them on a series of wine-tasting events,” Jacob says. “Then they go home and write about our region. Our national Grand Tasting events are a series of tours that our members join to explore key market areas of the United States, where contacts are made with wholesalers and media. We try to create an impression of our region that competes with the global market.”

**T**he Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance (PRWCA) has two key objectives: to create demand for Paso Robles wines and to enhance the Wine Country experience. Working together to achieve those objectives with media, national, regional and local events, membership and office reception, the PRWCA staff consists of the following:

- Stacie Jacob – Executive Director
- Gracie Rey – Promotions Manager
- Christopher Taranto – Communications Manager
- Meagan Callahan – Communications Coordinator
- Nicole Stonehocker – Promotions Coordinator
- Yanna Williams – Administrative Assistant



PRWCA Board of Directors (front row, from left) Steve Lohr, Tony Domingos, Gary Eberle; (middle row) Stephan Asseo, Alex Villicana; (back row) Cindy Newkirk, Don Brady, Paul Hoover, Jerry Reaugh

More than 500 members of the Wine Alliance represent wineries, wine-grape growers, associate members and hospitality partners. “We send members regular communications through e-mail, a bi-monthly newsletter, and we have two annual membership meetings,” according to Jacob. “We encourage members to get involved and take full advantage of association benefits. Members who get involved will experience greater benefits of their association. The team works hard to ensure members see value in the programs that position Paso Robles as a leader in the global wine community.”

When asked if PRWCA advocates for the industry, Jacob says they educate community leaders about issues affecting the industry. “We also were instrumental in creating

a new countywide Political Action Committee representing the county wine community. The SLO Wine Community PAC will be more active in advocating key issues on behalf of those members who belong.

“Our primary goal is to foster a healthy business climate, practice an environmentally balanced approach in the vineyards and wineries and socially give back to our local community,” Jacob says. “As a \$1.8 billion industry employing more than 8,000 people, it’s necessary to ensure the strength of the wine community in San Luis Obispo County. We are focused on the wines from the Paso Robles AVA, which extends south from the Monterey County line to the Cuesta Grade.”

Continued on page 10

## Wine–Grape Organizations continued

Throughout San Luis Obispo County, the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance, Central Coast Vineyard Team, San Luis Obispo County Vintners Association, Independent Grape Growers of Paso Robles and Central Coast Wine Growers Association fulfill the ongoing and on-growing potential of viticulture.

### Central Coast Vineyard Team

Central Coast Vineyard Team (CCVT) Executive Director Kris O'Connor and her staff work for about 300 members who came together to look at their practices and improve upon them. O'Connor was the first hire in 1994 when the grass roots group began interacting with each other and evolving into an organization that meets the needs of member growers and the regulatory agencies, all while partnering with the non-agricultural community.

CCVT membership is from Monterey, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and San Benito counties, with most members based in SLO. "The majority of members with higher acreage,

however, is in Monterey County," O'Connor says.

The organization's mission is to educate and guide growers toward more sustainable farming practices that protect environmental and human resources, while sharing information within and beyond the local industry and developing the public trust based on science and honesty.

After 15 years as an established organization with not-for-profit status, O'Connor is proud of CCVT's accomplishments. With a staff of four, one part-time employee plus consultants, they accomplish their goals by doing "a bit of everything" through research, demonstration and education to help make a difference in the wine industry.

O'Connor has a master's degree in Agriculture from Cal Poly, has taught irrigation classes there and co-authored a fertigation textbook. Her passion for the industry shows in her response to the top priorities with the Vineyard Team. "Research and documentation are critical in terms of supporting our mission and communicating our work to others. We regularly reach out to

regulatory agencies and the public.

"Communicating through newsletters, e-mail, articles, website and quarterly tailgates in three counties, we regularly share information with our members and the entire industry." CCVT typically does not advocate, "but we play a role in education and do outreach to government agency decision-makers whenever possible."

Priorities for CCVT are the needs to identify new farming tools and practices, to increase the implementation of sustainable practices and outreach proactive nature of growers so that they're rewarded in the marketplace and in terms of regulation."

The organization works hard to grow its non-restricted funding sources. CCVT has received 50 percent in grants from state and federal agencies and hopes to expand their new Certification Program and the innovative Earth Day Food & Wine Festival. Both of these programs are key in reaching non-ag communities. As O'Connor says, "The people who eat food and drink wine are potentially the best advocates for agriculture."



CCVT staff and board members (front, from left) Willy Cunha, Daryl Salm, Anji Perry, Dustin Rubbo, Linda Midkiff, Kris O'Connor, Gaylene Ewing, Kira Costa, Chris Ferrara; (back) Bill Hammond, Steve Peck, Bryan Wallingford, Don Ackerman, Stasi Seay, Jon Winstead, Gregg Hibbits. Not pictured are Eric Davidian, Justin Perrino, Mitch Wyss, Jill Whitacre, Anne Michul.

**T**he Central Coast Vineyard Team (CCVT) works to identify and promote the most environmentally safe, viticulturally and economically sustainable farming methods, while maintaining or improving the quality and flavor of wine grapes. The Team strives to be a model for wine grape growers and to promote the public trust of stewardship for natural resources. CCVT Staff consists of  
 Kris O'Connor – Executive Director  
 Jill Whitacre – Program Director  
 Gaylene Ewing – Project Technician  
 Kira Costa – Outreach and Education Coordinator  
 Anne Michul – Communications Assistant