



The Best in Texas

The dynamic grape growing and winemaking culture in Texas delivers twelve top wines in the state.

BY LORI MOFFATT



IN anticipation of Texas Wine Month in October, *Texas Monthly* teamed up with the Texas Department of Agriculture's Uncork Texas Wine program to orchestrate a wine competition unlike any other in the state—the inaugural Texas Vintners Cup 2021. The goal was to select twelve bottles that represent the best wines Texas is producing now.

With more than 500 wineries driving an economy worth more than \$13 billion, Texas is now the fifth-largest wine-producing state in the United States. (California, Washington, New York, and Oregon are the other four.) And while Texas wines consistently win medals at international competitions, some Texans may be unfamiliar with the diverse bounty awaiting them, from herbal Tempranillos and floral Viogniers to Texas-made rosés that with one sip can transport you to the fragrant strawberry garden of your fondest memories.

To be eligible, the competing wines were required to contain at least 75 percent Texas-grown fruit and come from a designated American Viticultural Area or Texas Appellation. (Grapes grow in many regions in Texas, including the Red River Valley, East Texas, and the Davis Mountains, but the majority of Texas wine grapes hail from the High Plains near Lubbock, followed by the Hill Country.)



Over the span of two days in June, three judges—Master Sommelier James Tidwell of Dallas, co-founder of TEXSOM, one of the world’s largest wine education conferences; Master Sommelier Jack Mason of Houston, who currently steers Texas’ portfolio at RNDC Distributing, and *Texas Monthly* wine and food writer Jessica Dupuy, a certified sommelier and author of *The Wines of Southwest U.S.A.*—evaluated 260 wines from 67 wineries for overall complexity, balance, and whether the wine demonstrated the signature characteristics of the grape.

“We don’t taste for personal preference,” explains Dupuy, who has written about wine for *Texas Monthly* since 2007. “Having done these evaluations for about a decade now, I’m impressed by the consistent increase in overall quality. Savvy producers keep raising the bar, which

is what will put wines from Texas on equal ground with wines from iconic regions of the world.”

“I was pleased to see so many different grape varieties and producers represented,” says Tidwell, who has tasted wines around the world. “This illustrates the dynamic grape growing and winemaking culture in Texas.”

Grape-growing is the fastest-growing sector of agriculture right now—one that creates community, facilitates friendship and gets a party started like few others can. “This is a great time for Texas wine!” says TDA Commissioner Sid Miller. “I encourage all *Texas Monthly* readers to check out the winners, ask for these wines in your favorite restaurant or store, or better yet, visit these winning wineries and see for yourself that Texas wine is the real deal.”

Jack Mason, left, and James Tidwell flank Jessica Dupuy.



TexasMonthly

The Winners

Here, in alphabetical order of vineyard name, are the winning wines with tasting notes and details about the top wineries that produce them. Call ahead to check hours and reservation requirements.

Bending Branch Winery, Comfort

BENDINGBRANCHWINERY.COM



WINNING WINE

2017 Tannat

Tasting Notes

"It's amazing to see how well Tannat is doing in Texas. This wine is big and robust with dark red fruit, blackberry, and dewberry, baking chocolate, spice. It's full-bodied, with dense, well-integrated tannin." —**Jack Mason**

"Chewy, leathery, and ripe tannins exemplifying the best of the Tannat grape variety. Note how the baking chocolate from oak complements the blueberry and blackberry liqueur notes. It's big, but long and fine; a well-made Tannat that shows what the variety can do." —**James Tidwell**

Winery details

In 2007, Bending Branch co-owner and winemaker Robert Young, a physician interested in the health benefits of red wine, chose Tannat, a deep-purple grape with high levels of antioxidants, as a focus for the winery.

Established in 2009, Bending Branch sits on 56 scenic acres near the Guadalupe River outside of Comfort. Known for its experimentation in every facet of winemaking, including fermentation methods and production processes, Bending Branch opens for in-person tastings daily. You can also taste selections from Bending Branch's catalog, which includes Cabernet Sauvignon, Petite Sirah, Picpoul Blanc, Tannat, Tempranillo, and Souzão at San Antonio's Pearl Farmer's Market.





Fall Creek Vineyards, Tow and Driftwood

FCV.COM



WINNING WINE

2019 Chardonnay “Terroir Reflection”
Certenber Vineyard

Tasting Notes

“This is a special wine for me. In 2013, we had so few white grapes that I fermented them in French oak barrels rather than larger steel tanks. That’s where this wine-making style for this wine started. It expresses itself with opulent aromas of grilled pineapple, smoky popcorn, and butterscotch, plus juicy flavors of grilled yellow peach, lemon, and vanilla cream.”—Fall Creek’s Sergio Cuadra

“This wine delivers on par with the rest of the world. It represents a history of Texas wine in the best possible way.”—James Tidwell

“This wine has a very classic French feel with notes of ripe peach, apple, sweet baking spice and oak, though not with a heavy hand. I like the body and bright acidity; a beautifully balanced wine.”—Jack Mason

Winery details

In 1973, recent University of Texas at Austin graduates Susan and Ed Auler went to France to study the cattle market and returned enamored with wine. Shortly thereafter, they planted a test vineyard on their Fall Creek Ranch, and by 1979 the couple had purchased land on the west side of Lake Buchanan, which would become home to Fall Creek’s original vineyard and winery.

“We have watched that nascent industry of two to three Texas wineries in 1975 grow to more than 400 wineries today,” says Susan. “Ed and I have the same mission then as we do today: to grow a tradition of fine wines, homegrown in the Texas Hill Country. When we started, we were fortunate to consult with Andre Tchelistcheff, a notable winemaker who defined early, great California wine. Today, we are building on Andre’s early successes at Fall Creek Vineyards with the talent of winemaker Sergio Cuadra.”

Visit tasting rooms in Tow and Driftwood to meet the winemakers, experience vineyard tours, and enjoy tasting sessions, events, and classes.



Kerrville Hills Winery, Kerrville

KERRVILLEHILLSWINERY.COM



WINNING WINE

2019 Sémillon

Tasting Notes

“Wow! Sémillon on par with Bordeaux is a rare thing, but this wine delivers!”—James Tidwell

“Our 2019 Sémillon is an oak-aged, full-bodied white wine with bright lemon vibrancy and opulent apple and pear flavors. It pairs incredibly well with smoked chicken or elegantly prepared grilled oysters.”—Kerrville Hills Winery’s John Rivenburgh

Winery details

In 2019, winemaker and educator John Rivenburgh purchased Kerrville’s first winery, Kerrville Hills, and has since transformed it into a wine incubator. Current members include Ab Astris Winery, Antima Cellars, Fly Gap, Kalasi Cellars, Siboney Cellars, and Yoder Cellars, which enjoy a collaborative environment akin to an educational think tank, benefitting from Rivenburgh’s mentorship. Rivenburgh’s own wines include Tempranillo and Tannat, the latter a grape for which he’s famous, in addition to the award-winning Sémillon.

“Our Sémillon grapes are grown in the Rustic Spur Vineyards in the Texas Hill Country, with Pedernales River valley soil and climate conditions that impart great structure and minerality, making this a fantastic representation of what Texas can grow,” says Rivenburgh.

A tasting room and patio with picnic tables overlooking broad views of the Texas Hill Country are both family- and pet-friendly with a food truck on site.



Lewis Wines, Johnson City

LEWISWINES.COM



WINNING WINE

2020 Swim Spot

Tasting Notes

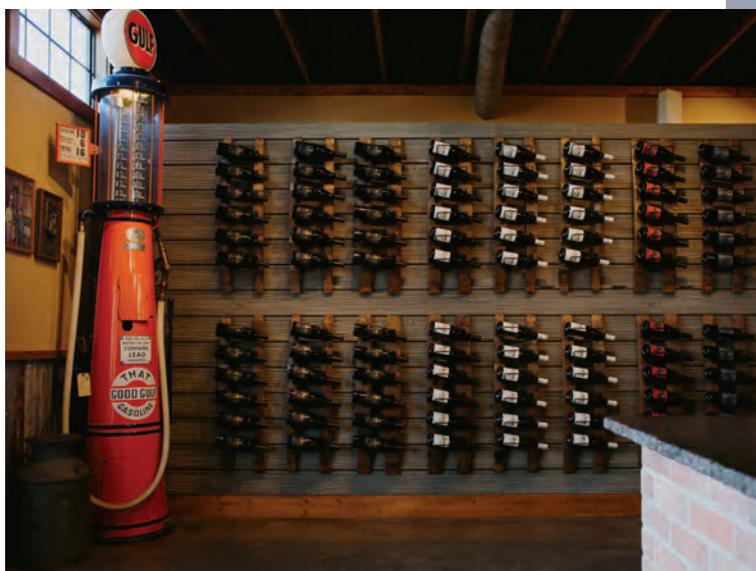
Inspired by Vinho Verde, the popular lower-alcohol wine from Portugal, winemaker and co-owner Doug Lewis made this wine from 100 percent East Texas Blanc du Bois grapes.

“Sometimes you need a fun, vibrant, energetic, and spritzzy wine, and this wine satisfies on all points. It’s a crisp, dry, playful wine that is none the less for that. This is that rare wine that balances fun and playful with serious and thoughtful.” —**James Tidwell**

Winery details

Established in 2010 by Doug Lewis and his business partner and former college roommate, Duncan McNabb, Lewis Wines makes traditional, food-friendly, European-style wines. Try them in Lewis Wine’s mostly outdoors tasting room, which is surrounded by oak trees and vineyards, with sweeping views of the Pedernales River Valley.

“We call our tastings educational experiences,” says winemaker Lewis, who worked for Pedernales Cellars while he was learning the ropes. “We can get as in-depth as people want. We just want to teach people to enjoy wine or figure out why they already do.”



Lost Draw Cellars, Fredericksburg

LOSTDRAWCELLARS.COM



WINNING WINE

2019 Sangiovese, Alta Loma Vineyards

Tasting Notes

Co-owner and winemaker Andrew Sides praises Sangiovese for its medium body and light acidity, qualities that make it very food-friendly. “I love this wine with a good thin-crust pizza—a simple yet solid pairing,” he says.

“Broad and sensuous, this is an elegant Sangiovese with notes of ripe cherry and pomegranate along with soft, sweet tannin, and a rich, layered structure.” —**Jessica Dupuy**

Winery details

Founded in 2012 by Andrew Sides, Andy Timmons, and Troy Ottmers, Lost Draw Cellars is a family-owned business with estate vineyards in the Texas High Plains and a tasting room in the heart of Fredericksburg.

“Fredericksburg’s rich German history plays a big role in our brand story,” says Andrew Sides. “We use the German word *Gemütlichkeit* quite a bit—we even have a wine by the name. It means, essentially, ‘a feeling of warmth, belonging, and good cheer.’ That’s really what it’s like to visit the Lost Draw Cellars tasting room.”



McPherson Cellars, Lubbock

MCPHERSONCELLARS.COM



WINNING WINE

2019 Carignan

Tasting Notes:

“A beautiful expression of what this Rhône variety can do in Texas, this wine boasts complexity, depth, and approachability with notes of ripe red raspberry, blueberry, and plum, backed by dried savory herbs, pepper, and smokiness.” —**Jessica Dupuy**

“We don’t like a lot of oak on it,” says McPherson Cellars’ Kim McPherson. “I love it with a New York strip on the grill with some yellow beets and asparagus.”

WINNING WINE

2020 The Queen Viognier

Tasting Notes

Originally made for the Queen’s English, an East Coast restaurant with ties to Texas, this “natural wine” is fermented with wild yeast, unfiltered, and apricot like a sunset.

“This is what a well-made orange wine should be. What peach juice wishes it could be. Shows the floral character of Viognier but has the elegant structure and vibrancy of deftly made skin-contact white wines. An excellent example of what Texas can achieve with a style that has recently surged in popularity.” —**James Tidwell**

Winery details

With two top Texas wines, McPherson Cellars’ Kim McPherson, who founded his eponymous winery in 2000, hails from one of Texas’ most influential wine-making families. His father, Dr. Clinton “Doc” McPherson, co-founded Texas’ first post-Prohibition winery, Llano Estacado Winery, in 1976. McPherson Cellars focuses exclusively on sustainably farmed, small-batch wines from the High Plains.

“Up here the climate is a lot like the famous Ribera wine region of Spain. We’re at 3,500 feet above sea level, we have low humidity, and we have deep, sandy-loam soils—good grape-growing conditions,” says McPherson.

The winery and tasting room at McPherson Cellars are located in a former 1930s Coca-Cola bottling plant in downtown Lubbock.





Slate Theory Winery, Fredericksburg

SLATEMILLWINECOLLECTIVE.COM



WINNING WINE

2020 Cinsault Rosé

Tasting Notes

"I really like the nose on it," says Slate Theory's Josh Fritsche. "It's herbaceous yet floral . . . a little rose petal."

"This lovely, blush-hued rosé checks all the boxes for the quintessential Provençal style. Bright notes of strawberry, raspberry, and cranberry playfully mingle with fragrant, floral aromas leading to a crisp, luscious palate." —**Jessica Dupuy**

Winery details

This fall, Slate Theory Winery—a brand created by the family behind Slate Mill Wine Collective—will open on U.S. 290 in Fredericksburg. The team promises an open concept tasting room, spacious patios, and tours of the cellar caves, in which winemaker Josh Fritsche experiments with the effects of sound waves on liquids, often playing Gregorian chants to his wines as they age.

Texas Heritage Vineyard, Fredericksburg

TEXASHERITAGEVINEYARD.COM



WINNING WINE

2018 Souzão

Tasting Notes

"Known for lending rich color and structure to a wine, Souzão is commonly used as a blending grape in Portugal. This wine has a promising future in Texas, with a rich ripe blackberry and blueberry profile backed by cocoa powder and a soft, earthy palate." —**Jessica Dupuy**

"The grapes produce a deeply red, intense wine with a smooth, long finish that we find appealing," says Texas Heritage's Susan Johnson. "Our winemaker suggests pairing Souzão with a steak sandwich and caramelized onions."

Winery details

With the idea of creating a business they could pass down to family, Texas natives Susan and Billy Johnson began planting grapes near Fredericksburg in 2015, soon completed a production facility, and opened a tasting room in 2018. These days, guests can enjoy winemaker Tyler Buddemeyer's wines made from estate-grown Alicante Bouschet, Malbec, Tempranillo, Tannat, and Souzão. "Our wines are primarily sold in our own tasting room, so we have the luxury of being able to explain the characteristics of these grapes to people who may not have heard of them before," says Susan.





Triple N Ranch Winery, Trinidad

TRIPLENRANCHWINERY.COM



WINNING WINE

2019 Malbec

Tasting Notes

Self-described “millennial winemaking cowboy” Michael McClendon made this wine for Triple N Ranch Winery at his custom-crush facility in Nacogdoches using High Plains fruit.

“It’s exactly what Malbec should be: warm, round, ripe, pleasant, but with enough structure of soft, ripe tannin and vibrant acidity to provide interest. Pretty plum, raspberry, and blackberry flavors make this a crowd-pleasing wine.” —**James Tidwell**

Winery details

This family-owned, female-run winery—with a tasting room, event space, vineyards and production space—opened to visitors in August 2020. Triple N—which stands for three generations of women with “N” names—has a restaurant on site, as well as a catering kitchen and sixty head of Longhorn cattle. Triple N hosts regular tribute-band concerts, with guests spread out over an acre on the ranch. Reservations for tastings and events required.

Vinovium Negotiant and Winery, Johnson City

VINOVIUM.WINE



WINNING WINE

2016 Sketch Tempranillo Blend

Tasting Notes

Now in its third vintage, Sketch is an unusual collaboration with Austin artist Mila Sketch, Vinovium, and a different winemaker each year. Winemaker Randy Hester, who made this inaugural 2016 vintage, says, “We decided on a blend that included Alicante Bouschet and Petite Sirah, to make a wine that was at the same time lighter on its feet and more complex than the Tempranillo on its own.”

“The best of the Tempranillo wines were blends and this was the best of the best. Baked clay earth notes, aromatic herb aromas, and pretty ripe fruit make a beautiful wine.” —**James Tidwell**

“A rich and velvety expression of Tempranillo, this wine has a distinct red clay character with notes of dried herbs and smoke, tomato leaf, and dried rose/potpourri. It’s meaty and savory on the palate and delivers with a complex structure.” —**Jack Mason**

Winery details

Vinovium—which means “wine road” in Latin—is a winery with merchant services to the wine industry. “We work with seven to ten winemakers and source grapes from between six to twelve vineyards, depending on the year,” says co-founder Daniel Kelada, who created Vinovium in 2012 with a team of sommelier friends. For visitors, this means one of Texas’ largest selections of kegged wines, a growler program, wine cocktails, wine-pairing dinners, picnics, and events. Open late.



Wedding Oak Winery, San Saba, Burnet, Fredericksburg

WEDDINGOAKWINERY.COM



WINNING WINE

2019 Roussanne

Tasting Notes

“We aim for a ripe, full, and luscious Roussanne that still has quite a bit of structure, freshness, and elegance that is ideal for barrel-aging,” says winemaker Seth Urbanek. “Roussanne also has more tannin than other white wines, making it the red wine drinker’s white wine.”

“This wine tastes like it belongs in the Rhône Valley with its round, medium body, and slight oily character. Subtle notes of yellow apple and stone fruit are accented by light floral aromas.” —**Jack Mason**

“Roussanne is one of the star white varieties of Texas, and this wine demonstrates why. The aromas of yellow fruits and flowers, oats, and savory notes are benchmark characteristics for this grape. Add the complex balance of ripe fruit, crisp acidity, and a round mouthfeel with a long, long finish and this is a standout wine.” —**James Tidwell**

Winery details

In July 2010, viticulturalist Mike McHenry and a group of friends interested in revitalizing the town of San Saba founded Wedding Oak Winery in the town’s historic downtown.

Today, tasting rooms there and in Burnet and Fredericksburg introduce guests to wines made by winemaker Seth Urbanek, a Houston native who focuses on making vineyard-specific wines with Texas-grown grapes, as well as the French-, Italian-, and Spanish-style blends that Wedding Oak is known for.



A Perfect Case

Winners of the Texas Vintners Cup 2021

- ★ **Bending Branch Winery** 2017 Tannat, Newsom Vineyards
- ★ **Fall Creek Vineyards** 2019 Chardonnay, Certenberg Vineyards
- ★ **Kerrville Hills Winery** 2019 Sémillon
- ★ **Lewis Wines** 2020 Swim Spot
- ★ **Lost Draw Cellars** 2019 Sangiovese, Alta Loma Vineyards
- ★ **McPherson Cellars** 2019 Carignan
- ★ **McPherson Cellars** 2020 The Queen Viognier
- ★ **Slate Theory** 2020 Cinsault Rosé
- ★ **Texas Heritage Vineyards** 2018 Souzão
- ★ **Triple N Ranch** 2019 Malbec
- ★ **Vinovium** 2016 Sketch Tempranillo Blend
- ★ **Wedding Oak Winery** 2019 Roussanne





The Honorable Mentions

More Great Texas Wines

These wines round out a total list of thirty standout wines from the Lone Star State, each with their own unique strengths and qualities.

Red

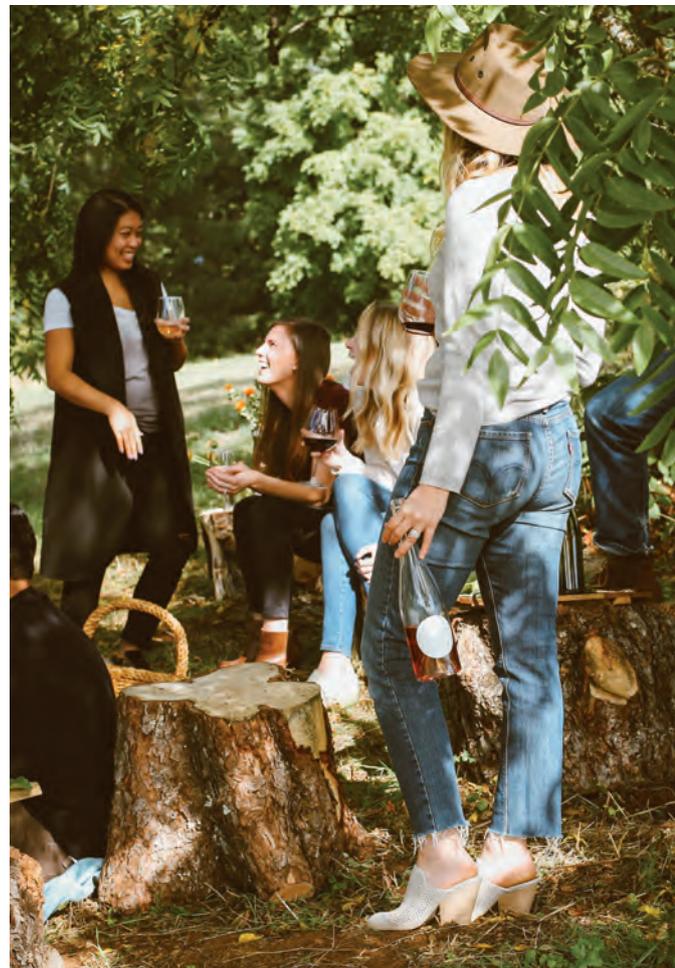
Bending Branch 2017 Tannat, Tallent Vineyards
 Bingham Family Vineyards 2017 Cabernet Franc
 Hye Meadow 2017 Petit Sirah
 Llano Estacado Winery 2019 Syrah
 Pedernales Cellars 2018 Newseaux
 Reddy Vineyards 2019 Cabernet Franc
 Ron Yates Winery 2017 Sangiovese
 Slate Theory 2018 The Paranoid (Souzão/Aglianico)
 Spicewood Vineyards 2017 Battle of Toro
 Spicewood Vineyards 2017 El Guey
 Vinovium 2018 Social Distance
 Wedding Oak Winery 2019 Tannat
 William Chris Vineyards 2018 Cinsault

Rosé

Cheremie Wine 2020 Rosé of Montepulciano
 Tatum Wines 2020 Rosé

White

Ab Astris 2020 Clairette Blanche
 English Newsom 2019 Trebbiano
 William Chris Vineyards 2020 Roussanne



Win a Wine Getaway!

SCAN QR CODE TO LEARN MORE

From Uncork Texas Wines, in partnership with *Texas Monthly Studio*, the Texas Vintners Cup competition has determined the ultimate case of Texas wine. Twelve individual bottles of Texas wines will complete a single case, reflecting the very best our state offers. Wine enthusiasts can enter the sweepstakes with winners receiving prizes from winning Texas wineries! Prize packages include Grand Prize: Texas Wine Weekend and full case of award-winning Texas Vintners Cup wines (value: \$1,500). Two Runners Up will each win a full case of award-winning Texas Vintners Cup wines (value: \$500 each).

Enter the sweepstakes and find our official rules at [TEXASMONTHLY.COM/WIN-TEXAS-WINE](https://www.texasmonthly.com/win-texas-wine). Only open to U.S. legal residents age 21 or older at time of participation. Deadline to enter at 5:00 PM CT on October 8, 2021.

