Propelling Temecula Wine Country as World-Class Destination

*A Temecula Valley Wine & Agriculture Heritage District will generate funds to promote the area*

Drive with your windows down, radio up, along Rancho California Road and into the cool breeze and endless rows of vines that soak up the soft spring sun.

Drive a little deeper, through the shadow of a passing hot air balloon, by roadside fruit stands, past the gateways to dozens of award-winning wineries and you’ll eventually arrive at the door of Chapin Winery. Sitting at the eastern edge of the Temecula Wine Country, it’s the perfect place to pull up a chair on the shady porch, enjoy a glass of 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon --- a wine that owner Steve Chapin is particularly fond of ---- and wonder if it’s just your imagination that life just got a little better.

It wasn’t always this way.

Twenty years ago, Chapin didn’t really exist. It was nothing more than an outpost off a distant road where the winemaker would sell to a few stray tourists who wandered off the beaten path. He wasn’t alone. Many of the wineries you see today were just ideas dancing in their owners’ heads and sketches on paper.

Not anymore.

 “We’re packed every weekend --- a lot of weekdays, too,” Chapin said. “Times have changed and Temecula is now a place expected to produce quality wine,” Chapin said.

Times are changing indeed. The region is now dotted with more than 50 wineries and the grape growers are earning recognition alongside other prominent California wine regions for bragging rights as a world-class wine destination. A stone’s throw from Los Angeles, Orange County and San Diego, the Temecula Valley Wine Country has been making a name for itself since the 1970s, but a new development could just push it to the top of the list in a short time.

Efforts to promote the Temecula Wine Country recently got a major boost from the Riverside County Board of Supervisors, who unanimously approved a special assessment district that is expected to generate up to $1.2 million a year. That money will go a long way in funding promotional campaigns to drive up tourism in southwest Riverside County.

One of the many people supporting this effort is Wilson Creek Winery & Vineyards CEO Bill Wilson.

“This will help us get the word out that we make world-class wine,” he said. “We want the right people to come here, come here for the right reasons and stay longer. That will help everybody. This is the mechanism to get that done.”

The new Temecula Valley Wine & Agriculture Heritage District, which is similar to a business improvement district, includes the area just east of the city of Temecula, stretching north to Lake Skinner and south toward Vail Lake, with the northeast corner of the district stopping at Benton Road, near the Sycamore Hills community. The district is self-sustaining, meaning no local, state or federal money will be used to support it.

So how will the money be raised? Beginning April 1, the 51 vintners in the district will each pay 1 percent in annual gross sales receipts over the next five years. The district is set to expire as a revenue-generating entity by 2026, but it could be extended.

Temecula Valley Winegrowers Association Executive Director Krista Chaich said the fundraising effort is groundbreaking, not just for Temecula Valley, but also for wine regions throughout the country.

“Up until now, we have relied solely on membership dues and fundraising programs to market our region, as many other smaller wine regions do,” Chaich said. “The passing of this district will allow us to continue to grow our burgeoning wine country and, as other regions are inspired to pursue similar funding models, the wine tourism industry as a whole.”

Chaich said the money raised from the vintners will be directed into marketing and special events that draw attention to the wine country as well as special projects specifically geared to enhancing the district's image.

That sounds good to BJ Fazeli, managing director of Fazeli Cellars Winery on De Portola Road, who said the money will go a long way in helping wineries be more independent and in charge of their own destiny.

"We are trying to put Temecula Valley Wine Country on the map more than its pioneers did,” he said. “This is a hidden jewel, and we need to promote it properly."

The hidden jewel he speaks of has been around for nearly 50 years. Winery pioneers John Moramarco and Ely Callaway planted the first vineyards in a place ideal for grape-growing thanks to the warm days and nights cooled by the Pacific Ocean wind and fog that sails through a gap in the Santa Margarita Mountains. The Wine Country was formally recognized by the County Board of Supervisors in a 2013 vote, led by then-Supervisor Jeff Stone, that defined its boundaries within a 19,000- acre space.

The region has a lot to offer, thanks partly to the growing number of restaurants, hotels, golf courses, breweries, distilleries and the Pechanga Resort Casino.

But it’s the wine that keeps a lot of people coming back.

From Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon to Syrah, Zinfandel, Grenache and Merlot, the area is producing almost every familiar variety in California. Plus, there are also some grapes that aren’t so common, like Vermentino, Falanghina and Counoise. Red blends are popular, whether they’re classic styles like Rhône and Bordeaux mixes, and so too are warmer-climate grape varieties like Sangiovese and Tempranillo.

Europa Village Winery owner Dan Stephenson said the area "needs a lot more promotion" and needs to expand into international marketing.

"Assessing this district and using the funds to promote it is a no-brainer," he said.

Because of the ongoing coronavirus public health lockdowns, most wineries have been operating under restraints, with prohibitions on indoor dining and large gatherings. Grape cultivation and sales of wines, however, have not stopped.

“As the world slowly and surely returns back to normal, we are looking forward to exploring new and engaging ways to introduce Temecula Valley Wine Country to wine lovers all over the world, and welcome back long-time fans with elevated wine experiences,” said Phil Baily owner and winemaker at Baily Winery and Temecula Valley Winegrowers Association Board of Directors President. “The increase in budget as a result of this new assessment district will allow us to completely reimagine what is possible for marketing our extraordinary wine region.”