

# *Wines in the Pines*

A new crop of wineries blend sweet and dry wines  
with food and music in the verdant hills of northeast Texas.

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I HAVE LIVED MOST OF MY LIFE in the “dry” Piney Woods—dry as in beer and wine, not as in rainfall. You never heard the words “winery” and “East Texas” used in the same sentence...but not anymore. Changes in state law during the last decade encouraged a vanguard of viticulturists to establish 17 wineries now showcased on the Piney Woods Wine Trail.

Several of the wineries on the trail—an area bounded by I-30, US 84, US 59 and TX 19—make sweet wines from local fruits. The other wineries turn native, American hybrid, and European-style wine grapes into sweet *and* dry wines, as my wife, Sallie, and I discover on a recent wine-tasting jaunt.

We visit four wineries—Kiepersol Estates near Tyler, Los Pinos near Pittsburg, Enoch's Stomp near Longview, and Tara near Athens. We go for the wines and linger for the tours, dining, music, and lodging.

## **Kiepersol Estates**

A scenic country lane leads through high rolling hills to Kiepersol Estates, located near Bullard, 15 miles south of Tyler. The sprawling estate calls itself the “land of beef and wine.” We see why as we drive past lush meadows with grazing cattle, neatly-trimmed vineyards, a gated community of stylish homes, and an upscale steakhouse restaurant with accompanying bed and breakfast lodge. (See *Texas Highways*, September 2006).

We park at the tasting room, a stately brick structure shrouded in grape arbors, and walk past a tree-studded grassy amphitheater. That's where the winery hosts outdoor events including its Harvest Fest & Grape Stomp (October 15, 2011). Behind the tasting room, we join

Kiepersol founder Pierre de Wet and vintner daughter Marnelle Durrett for a winery tour. De Wet planted his first vines in 1999 and named the place after a tree in his native South Africa. Kiepersol produces 15 classic wines—from sweet white Moscato to dry red Merlot—made from European-style *vitis vinifera* grapes grown on site.

“People said we couldn’t grow vinifera here,” de Wet tells our happy wine-sipping group of eight visitors as we stroll past 60 acres of vinifera vines. Vinifera, we learn, thrives in dry West Texas, but humid East Texas forests harbor Pierce’s disease that threatens the vines.

A short stroll from the tasting room we enter the fermentation room lined with stainless steel tanks. The pioneering winemaker hands out new glasses, and our tour suddenly becomes an impromptu tasting. “Last November a light bulb went off in my head as I tasted this Cabernet Sauvignon,” he says, pointing to tank No. 3. “I decided this doesn’t need barrel aging. It’s perfect as is.” Our group agrees that the Cab has a dry and refreshing taste.

We peek in the lab where an enologist tests each barrel, but we can’t enter the barrel room for fear of tracking in bacteria. Instead, an elevated platform offers a view of 700 oak barrels aging red wines and port from nine to 36 months.

Tour over, Sallie and I stroll through the adjacent vineyard, heavy laden with red Italian Sangiovese wine grapes. A pamphlet guides us along a one-mile vineyard walking tour. We learn how the vineyard’s trellis and irrigation system works and why the vineyard has windmill-like wind machines (for cooling vines in summer and deterring freezes in winter).

The guide also gives us wine tasting tips, which we soon put to good use inside the vaulted tasting room which overlooks the vineyard. Sallie prefers the drier tastes, especially the tangy white 2010 Kiepersol Viognier and the smooth red 2007 Kiepersol Merlot. I concur on the merlot but also enjoy the fruity Sweet Mengsel (a Sangiovese and Tempranillo blend) sold under Kiepersol’s Bridge label.

Kiepersol produces 180,000 bottles annually under several labels. The Kiepersol Estates' site grows the grapes, makes the wines, and bottles its own labels. Two other locations—KE Bushman's Winery, also near Bullard, and KE Cellars Winery in Tyler—blend and bottle their own labels. Their tasting rooms offer all the Kiepersol labels, plus dozens from other Texas wineries. KE Cellars even hosts live music (nightly, except Monday).

### **Los Pinos Ranch Vineyards**

Next we wind along a narrow backroad four miles south of Pittsburg to Los Pinos Ranch Vineyards. The entryway veers through a 10-acre vineyard of American hybrid white Blanc du Bois and American native red Lenoir (Black Spanish) grapevines. These disease-resistant varieties grow well here and produce Los Pinos' seven sweet and semi-sweet wines. The winery's seven dry wines come from vinifera grapes grown on its 25-acre West Texas vineyard near Brownfield, according to Los Pinos founder Jeff Sneed, who greets us at the tasting room, housed in a converted hay barn.

In 2000 Sneed closed his architectural engineering firm in California for semi-retirement as a Texas winemaker "in the middle of nowhere," he says. His wines and the Italian-style ambiance of his restaurant and tasting room proved popular beyond his wildest dreams. His first release, a 2005 Sangiovese wine, sold more than 4,000 bottles in seven weeks. Los Pinos now produces 144,000 bottles a year sold at the winery and 200-plus stores statewide.

Sneed leads us through the tasting room's open-air pavilion where patrons sample wines and tapas, such as cured meats and cheeses, paninis, and pizzas. The pavilion faces the vineyard and life-sized statuary of a mother elephant and two calves. "That's a good-luck symbol," Sneed says as we head inside the restaurant where we sample sweet and dry flights of wine cleverly served in corked lab vials. A score sheet shows each wine's characteristics and

name—ranging from the expected (Sangiovese and Cabernet Sauvignon) to the comical (Rosie the Riveter and Sweet Rodeo Red).

We munch on “brackers,” a crisp cross between Italian bread and crackers, and rate our preferences. Sallie and I agree on a favorite sweet choice—the fruity white Blanc du Bois—and a dry red choice, the darkly complex cabernet-merlot blend, Grand Reserve Meritage 2007.

Sneed makes the wines, and his executive chef wife, Dana, cooks the food and directs the restaurant staff. The Old World style of the restaurant’s decor—replete with plastered gold walls, drawn burgundy curtains, and Renaissance-style paintings—reminds us of places we visited on our Italian vacation last year. Today’s chef special is a big hit with us—a peppery grilled pork chop with tarragon crème, spinach polenta soufflé, and fried leeks with sautéed grape tomatoes. We can’t resist splitting a warm chocolate cake filled with hot chocolate pudding topped with cold vanilla ice cream.

Satiated, we sip more wine and enjoy the scene. A live jazz band plays as we spot vintner Sneed—wine glass in hand—moving table to table, chatting up guests. “We think of this as one big happy Italian wine family,” he says later. “There’s no hurry. Bring the kids. Stay all night.”

We overnight comfortably in a hunting lodge-style cottage, one of two lodgings that face the vineyard. I awake early for a sunrise walk past grapevines glistening with dew. A lane leads along the edge of the vineyard, where a level hayfield once stood, then it winds back to the winery and tasting room. Behind the winery I pause at a tree-lined pond where more rows of grapevines grow almost to the water’s edge. I agree with Sallie’s summary of Los Pinos: “This is close to home, but I really feel like I’ve been somewhere special.”

### **Enoch’s Stomp Vineyard & Winery**

The entry lane to Enoch's Stomp Vineyard and Winery skirts alongside 11 acres of grapevines in rows that undulate, rollercoaster-style, on a clay hill near Harleton, 19 miles northeast of Longview. Suddenly the lane tops a hill, and the view takes our breath away. Rolling meadows, ponds, and dense forests reach toward a ridge visible 30 miles away.

This place was once a horse ranch, and the entry lane ends at a metal barn converted into a small winery and tasting room. Attached is an open-air pavilion where special events take place—including late summer harvest grape stomps, plus themed dinners and live music throughout the year. Tasting room manager Marla Cabbusiness seats us at a table on the pine-shaded outdoor patio where we notice a rotisserie spit over a hole in the ground. “That’s for the South African pig roast we have each spring,” she notes. “It’s very popular.”

South African pig roast? Turns out the winery’s vintner and co-founder is Altus Koegelenberg, a fifth-generation grape grower from South Africa, who popped the corks on Enoch’s Stomp’s first vintage only three years ago. Loyal local fans—mostly sweet wine lovers—spread the word, and the fledgling winery annually makes 43,000 bottles, available here and at several wine stores in Longview and Marshall.

We join other wine sippers on the patio promontory where a breeze cools the day’s heat, and wine tastings quench the thirst. We sample several of the dozen or so sweet, semi-sweet, and dry vintages made from estate-grown grapes—Blanc du Bois, Norton, and Lenoir. (The winery also makes Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon from West Coast grapes.) We settle on the winery’s signature 2010 Blanc du Bois, an off-dry white, with a pleasing taste.

After the tasting, we mosey across the lane to check out a two-story log building (the former ranch house) where more sippers chat and enjoy wind-swept views from the wraparound porch. We peek into the building’s dining room, lined with natural wood and a fireplace. Unfortunately, we’ve missed lunch (served 11-3 Friday and Saturday), but French chef Anne

Kelt's menu sounds enticing—especially the braised chicken with couscous, complimented by blueberry cake with lemony whipped cream.

Vintner Koegelenberg and partner Jon Kral, a Longview physician, named their winery Enoch's Stomp after the inspirational Biblical figure, Enoch. We end our visit inspirationally from the dining room porch, wine glasses in hand, as a golden sun slips behind row after row of flourishing grapevines.

### **Tara Vineyard & Winery**

Our final stop is Tara Vineyard and Winery, seven miles northwest of Athens. Founders Patrick and Susan Pierce named the place for the Irish hilltop home of mythical God-Kings. Tara, of course, is also the plantation in the classic film, *Gone with the Wind*. That's fitting, we decide, as we pass an eight-acre Blanc du Bois vineyard lorded over by a white-columned mansion.

The two-story 1880s mansion was relocated here from downtown Athens, where it was the ancestral home of legendary oilman Clint Murchison, Jr., who founded the Dallas Cowboys football team. It's now the Tara Inn, a bed and breakfast lodging with verandas perfect for wine sipping. The inn is booked up, but Patrick Pierce walks us through the mansion. We fancy the "Gone With the Zen" room, regal with burgundy wine-colored walls and a view of the front vineyard, as well as the swallow nests that cling to Ionic columns on the front portico.

The Pierces produce 14 red and white wines, some 20,000 bottles a year sold here and at several Dallas-Fort Worth shops. The vintners buy vinifera grapes from vineyards in West Texas and New Mexico to make their European-style varietals. Their estate wines come from Blanc du Bois and Lenoir grapes grown on-site and at several nearby vineyards. "Like in Europe, we're trying to engender a local wine community," Patrick Pierce tells us, "by getting local farmers to grow our wine grapes and our restaurant food."

A converted horse barn houses Tara's restaurant, winery, and tasting room. Chef Jeff Redden seats Sallie and I on the covered, open-air patio, overlooking the vineyard and Tara Inn, as a musician sets up for tonight's show. We order an appetizer of tomato-basil bruschetta, and the Italian-trained cook flatly states, "I make the best bruschetta you've ever had." Darned if he wasn't right. The red-and-green mixture spills across crunchy Italian bread, drizzled with olive oil and dotted with capers. Chef Redden also sells us on his slider-like Tara burger—a half-pound of beef served simply with a "special" sauce on a sweet homemade bun. As for the wines, we like Tara's signature white Blanc du Bois and its medium-bodied Stagecoach Red, a Lenoir-Merlot blend.

Patrick Pierce planted his first vineyard five years ago. He believes the 2010 grape crop will make his best vintages to date—with whites available now and reds in two years or so. "We're still at a young grape stage. Vineyards in the Hill Country have two decades on us," he says. "We were told that wineries in East Texas would be a fad, but the Piney Woods Wine Trail has shown what excellent vintners we have."

That good news should spread quickly, says Ed Hellman, Texas Tech University professor of viticulture and extension specialist at Texas AgriLife Extension in Lubbock. "Winemakers are happy to share their expertise, because they understand that a critical mass of good wines made in a region will result in more attention. That's what the Piney Woods Wine Trail is all about."

Some wines that Sallie and I sample on our wine jaunt are excellent. Others lack the delicate complexity we've long enjoyed at established wineries in the Texas Hill Country. But like a fine red vintage, wineries on the Piney Woods Wine Trail and the experiences they offer—wine, good food, and lodgings in scenic settings—should only get better with time.

## Piney Woods Wine Trail

OCTOBER is Texas Wine Month, so hit the road for tastings along the Piney Woods Wine Trail. The trail sponsors the annual Piney Woods Wine Festival, **May XX (call Gerald Jones, phone below, for date)**, 2012 in Mt. Vernon. Check the trail website ([www.PineyWoodsWineTrail.com](http://www.PineyWoodsWineTrail.com)) for details, as well as maps and links to wineries. Winery websites show directions, hours, offerings, prices, and how to buy—plus details on events, lodging, and dining. Before you hit the trail, join the Texas Department of Agriculture's Texas Winery Passport program (866/4TX-WINE, [gotexanwine.org](http://gotexanwine.org)) and get gifts for visiting Texas wineries.

Except as noted, the following wineries offer tastings, tours, dining, live music, lodging, and events. Some offer online sales of their wines.

**Kiepersol Estates Vineyards & Winery**, 4120 FM 344E, Tyler, 903/894-8995, and **KE Bushman's**, 1565 FM 2493 E, Bullard; 903/952-2330 ([www.kiepersol.com](http://www.kiepersol.com)). **KE Cellars**, 4574 S. Broadway, Tyler, 903/939-9805 ([www.kecellars.com](http://www.kecellars.com)).

**Los Pinos Ranch Vineyards**, 658 CR 1334, Pittsburg, 903/855-1769;  
[www.LosPinosRanchVineyards.com](http://www.LosPinosRanchVineyards.com).

**Enoch's Stomp Vineyard & Winery**, 870 CR 4312, Harleton (near Longview), 903/736-9494 or 903/777-3249 ([www.enochsstomp.com](http://www.enochsstomp.com)). No overnight lodging.

**Tara Vineyard & Winery**, 8603 CR 3914, Athens, 903/675-7023 ([www.tarawinery.com](http://www.tarawinery.com)).

### RESOURCES

--Los Pinos Ranch Vineyard & Piney Woods Wine Trail, **Gerald Jones**;

[gerald@lospinosranchvineyards.com](mailto:gerald@lospinosranchvineyards.com); 903.240-9515

--Los Pinos Ranch Vineyard, Jeff Sneed (founder) and Ana Sneed (chef); 903-855-1769

--Kiepersol Estates: Marnelle Durrett, 903-530-0321 (cell) winery@kiepersol.com; Pierre de Wet  
(via Marnelle)

--Tara Vineyard & Winery Patrick Pierce; 903) 675-7023; cpierce@tarawinery.com;  
Susan Z. Steger-Pierce, sipoftexas@tarawinery.com

--Enoch's Stomp Vineyard & Winery; Altus Koegelenberg (903) 736-9494 cell; Marla  
Cabbiness, 903-241-2295; Jon Kral, 903-918-2889

--Ed Hellman, Lubbock; 806) 746-4038; e-hellman@tamu.edu (Professor of Viticulture and  
Extension Specialist Texas AgriLife Extension and Texas Tech University); re: # of wineries, law  
changes

--Fran Pontasch, Texas AgriLife Extension, ET winery specialist; Stephenville; 254-968-4144  
x212; re: growing vinifera in East Texas

--George Avery, SFA archeology lab, 936-468-2457; re: Spanish wineries

--Web:

--<http://www.pineywoodswinetrail.com/>

--<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/southerngarden/Texaswine.html>

--[www.txwines.org](http://www.txwines.org); [www.gotexanwine.org](http://www.gotexanwine.org)

--<http://www.gotexanwine.org/passport/txwinerypassportrulesandrewards.html>