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Caption: Top: Sheets of plastic protect tender grapevines at the J.A. **Balistreri Vineyards** from the wind and cold. An underground system waters them and can heat them. By Hal Stoelzle / News Staff

Photographer. FILE: ARCHIVE. HARD COPY: STOELZLE - SHOOT DATE 2000: 2/29

CAPTION: Left: John **Balistreri** uncorks a bottle of wine produced by his winery. J.A. **Balistreri Vineyards**, in Adams County, is the 27th winery in operation in Colorado. By Hal Stoelzle / News Staff

Photographer. FILE: ARCHIVE. HARD COPY: STOELZLE - SHOOT DATE 2000: 2/29

CAPTION: The vineyard of Colorado Cellars near Palisade on the Western Slope, the birthplace of the state's wine industry. Some wineries are making the Front Range home. By Ellen Jaskol / News Staff Photographer / 1998. FILE: ARCHIVE.

CAPTION: Dave Tewksbury of Tewksbury & Co. displays a bottle of wine during a wine tasting. By Ahmad Terry / News Staff

Photographer. FILE: ARCHIVE. HARD COPY: TERRY - SHOOT DATE 2000: 3/8

CAPTION: Dan Montgomery and Leanna Slater taste some wine at Tewksbury & Co. at their tasting room in Writer's Square off Larimer Street in LoDo. By Ahmad Terry / News Staff Photographer. FILE: ARCHIVE. HARD COPY: TERRY - SHOOT DATE 2000: 3/8

CAPTION: Locator Map / COLORADO WINERY LOCATIONS. See Infobox for additional information. By News Staff. FILE: UNAVAILABLE

TAKING ROOT GROWING NUMBER OF WINERIES MAKE FRONT RANGE HOME

Source: Dina Berta

News Staff Writer

Family members and friends who have been drinking John **Balistreri's** homemade wines for years crowded the new tasting room at the recent opening celebration of J.A. **Balistreri Vineyards**.

They feasted on cheese and sliced meats while sipping the winery's inaugural releases: A bold Merlot with a hint of cherries and chocolate, and a dark zinfandel with slight sweet cherry and currant flavors.

Balistreri Vineyards is the 27th winery in operation in Colorado. But **Balistreri** didn't open on the Western Slope - the birthplace of the state's wine industry. Instead, it is one of a growing number of wineries trying to succeed on the Front Range.

While the state's industry hit a high of \$4.1 million in sales last year, Colorado wines account for less than 1 percent of wine consumption in the state. But the industry is out to increase its market share as more wineries open, including those trying to grow **vineyards** in the

tougher climate of the Front Range.

Balistreri is in unincorporated Adams County, less than a mile east of the Mousetrap - the intersection of Interstates 25 and 70. Trucks and tractor-trailers rumble by the winery's vineyard on a five-acre parcel along 66th Avenue and Washington Street.

Sheets of plastic protect the tender vines from the wind. A double-duty underground system waters the plants and can heat them in the event of freezing temperatures.

The **Balistreri** family planted the vineyard three years ago. This summer, with plenty of care, they hope to bring in their first grape harvest.

``It's going to be a challenge, a very big challenge," said Julie Domenico, daughter of John and Birdie **Balistreri**.

The Balistreris, however, didn't have to wait for their own harvest to open the winery. They bought grapes two years ago from **vineyards** in California and the Western Slope. Their '98 vintages now are for sale every Saturday from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. in their winery's tasting room at 1946 E. 66th Ave.

8 wineries open in last 6 years

Eight wineries have opened along the Front Range in the past six years. Some see that as a sign that Colorado's wine industry has reached a point where vineyard harvests are both plentiful and of good enough quality to supply other wineries.

Changes in state law also are encouraging more production of Colorado wines.

``We have really turned a corner the last two or three years," said Doug Caskey, executive director of the Colorado Wine Industry Development Board. ``We've seen a dramatic increase in quality.

Vineyards are maturing and winemakers are maturing in getting a handle on growing grapes and making wine in Colorado."

The wine board wants to double the industry's share of wine consumption in Colorado over the next five years. While wine sales increased about 20 percent between fiscal years '98 and '99, Colorado wine consumption is still just a sip of the overall wine market. State wineries sold 308,163 liters of wine last year out of more than 34 million liters of wine sold.

Doubling market share can only come from doubling production, doubling output of **vineyards** and doubling sales, Caskey said.

The state's Limited Winery Act recently was modified to encourage production. Now, at least half of the grapes a winery uses must come from Colorado during the first five years of operation, and at least 75 percent after five years.

Limited wineries also can have up to five remote tasting rooms where they also can sell bottles of wine, including on Sundays.

A manufacturing winery, such as **Balistreri Vineyards**, can have just one tasting room and can't sell on Sundays, but the winery isn't restricted in the amount of out-of-state grapes it can use.

Balistreri wines handcrafted

Only two of **Balistreri's** eight wines are made from Colorado grapes. The rest are made from grape varieties trucked in from California. As the winery expands, John **Balistreri** said he plans to increase the level of Colorado grapes.

The winery is still a small operation - it poured 3,000 bottles for the 1998 labels, and 1999 wines are aging in about 30 wooden barrels. Each high-shouldered bottle is stamped with the number of the barrel

it came from.

The labels are put on by hand. Family members melt wax on a kitchen stove and dip the neck of each bottle in the wax to form a covering over the corks.

``When we say handcrafted, it's a lot of hand labor all the way through," John **Balistreri** said.

He estimates the winery has produced about \$100,000 worth of wine, and he expects the selling to go slow.

``I don't see us expanding a lot real fast," **Balistreri** said. ``We will try to let the market develop as we go."

Winemakers estimate it takes about five years for a winery to make a profit, and only then if the owners avoid expanding and upgrading. Production at Trail Ridge Winery in Loveland has increased every year since its tasting room opened in 1996, but it has yet to turn a profit, said co-owner and winemaker Tim Merrick.

``We're still a work in prog-ress," he said.

Like other Front Range wineries, Trail Ridge gets its grapes from the Western Slope.

Merrick planted a vineyard on a portion of the three acres adjacent to the winery. He has been experimenting with different types of grapes, looking for hybrids hearty enough to grow in the colder climate.

Unlike the Balistreris, who also grow flowers for wholesalers, Merrick is a backyard farmer turned viticulturist. He and his brother-in-law, Mark Fiore, ran a winemaking and home-brewing shop in northwest Denver for 10 years before opening the winery.

Merrick eventually quit to run the winery fulltime. He has replanted the vineyard with grape varieties that might survive the winter and early spring frosts, but he won't see a harvest for three to five years. In the meantime, he will continue to buy grapes from other growers, bringing in 15 to 20 tons of grapes.

Trail Ridge produces about 2,500 cases of wine a year without grapes from its own vineyard.

Since getting picked up by National Distributors, the state's largest liquor distributor, Trail Ridge wines now are for sale at about 50 locations, including liquor and wine stores and several restaurants in Larimer and Boulder counties, as well as Denver.

``For the first couple of years, we took care of wholesale accounts directly," Merrick said. ``I was literally delivering wine out of the trunk of my car."

Trail Ridge was the first Colorado wine that National Distributors carried. The Denver-based company now sells two Western Slope wineries - 15-year-old Plum Creek Cellars and 12-year-old Carlsen Vinyards.

Colorado wine quality improving

The Colorado wine category has grown as the quality has improved, said Jim Smith, president of National Distributors, which serves 100 retail accounts and 30 restaurants with the Colorado labels.

``Historically, when you start up in a market dominated by big players, it's hard to get the attention of big distributors," Smith said. ``But (the Colorado wineries) are really competitive from a quality perspective, more so than they were 10 or eight years ago."

So sure of the quality, National Distributors salespeople encourage clients to place the Colorado wines next to California wines and wines from other regions and let them compete head-to-head, he said.

The Colorado wine consumer is sophisticated, and Colorado is considered a premium wine market in the country, Smith said. The

local consumer also has become more willing to try the state's wines. Colorado wines are still a tough sell, however, said Wayne Belding, co-owner of the Boulder Wine Merchant and a master sommelier. Sometimes customers are taken aback when they see a state wine. "They will say, 'Oh, I had a Colorado wine once and didn't like it,' so they think they are all bad," Belding said. "There is still a lot of stuff out there that is not particularly good, but there are also some very, very promising wines being made."

Wineries do most of their marketing through their own tasting rooms. Plum Creek in Palisade has operated a tasting room in Denver for the past 10 years. Since June, the local tasting room has been at Tewksbury & Co., a tobacco shop in Writer's Square off Larimer Street in LoDo.

Tasting rooms give the wineries more exposure and help familiarize customers with the product. Some liquor and wine stores also showcase the Colorado wines.

Applejack Liquors in Wheat Ridge, for example, places the wines in a prominent location so customers will notice them, even though the state wines are a small portion of the store's overall wine business.

"We don't have huge amounts of room, but we want to make sure the Colorado wine industry is supported," said co-owner Jim Shpall. "If we don't support it in the home state, the industry will flounder."

Colorado wines competitive

But state pride or curiosity only goes so far with consumers, said Bill Dutton, general manager of the Buckhorn Exchange restaurant in Denver.

"You have to give them something they like," Dutton said.

The historic Buckhorn started carrying Colorado wines about three years ago, but has experienced an increase in sales during the past year. Dutton attributes that to improved quality and more competitive prices.

"When you put a Colorado wine in front of the consumer, you are basically asking them to change their behavior," he said. "We now have a product we can afford to sell against the California wines." Additional wineries should increase competition and, in turn, improve quality, winemakers said.

"There is some uneven quality out there," Merrick said. "As we have more wineries open up, shelf space gets tight. I think that's going to shake out a little bit. The retail accounts, the restaurants and ultimately the consumer is going to make the decision as to who gets the shelf space and who gets on a wine list."

INFOBOX (1)

Chronology of events in Colorado's wine industry:

- * 1882: Gravity canal irrigation is introduced to the Grand Valley. Colorado River water is diverted into gravity canals at the mouth of De Beque Canyon near Palisade.
- * 1883: Arthur E. Pabor first recognizes the fruit-producing potential of the Grand Valley and plants grapes, apples, pears, peaches, cherries and plums near Fruita.
- * 1890: Gov. George A. Crawford, who founded Grand Junction in 1881, plants 60 acres of grapes and other fruit on Rapid Creek above Palisade.
- * 1899: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census of the United States - Agriculture reports a Colorado grape harvest of 586,300 pounds and wine production of 1,744 gallons.

- * 1909: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census of the United States - Agriculture reports a Colorado harvest of 1.03 million pounds from 254,292 vines of bearing age and 101,332 vines of pre-bearing age. More than 1,030 Colorado farms are involved in grape production.
- * 1916: The General Assembly of Colorado enacts a prohibition statute. Colorado is dry for four years before the 18th Amendment, which creates national prohibition. Commercial winemaking ceases in Colorado and **vineyards** are uprooted.
- * 1933: The 18th Amendment is repealed and national prohibition ends.
- * 1968: Gerald Ivancie opens Ivancie Winery, the first modern Colorado winery. Ivancie also develops experimental plantings of premium wine grapes in and around the Grand Valley.
- * 1974: Colorado State University's Orchard Mesa Research Center, located in Grand Junction, begins vineyard research.
- * 1977: The General Assembly enacts the Colorado Limited Winery Act, which creates a special permit for small farm wineries, currently the backbone of the Colorado wine industry.
- * 1978: Colorado Mountain **Vineyards** (now Colorado Cellars) opens.
- * 1982: Rocky Mountain Association of Vintners and Viticulturists, an association of winemakers and grape growers, is formed.
- * 1983: Pikes Peak **Vineyards** opens.
- * 1985: Plum Creek Cellars opens.
- * 1988: Carlson **Vineyards** opens.
- * 1990: The General Assembly enacts the Colorado Wine Industry Development Act, which creates the Colorado Wine Industry Development Board; Grande River **Vineyards** opens; Grand Valley is designated a Federal Viticultural Area.
- * 1992: Columbine Cellars opens.
- * 1993: Minturn Cellars opens.
- * 1994: Cottonwood Cellars opens; Shadow Mountain Cellars opens; Stoney Mesa Winery opens; Trail Ridge Winery opens.
- * 1995: Mountain Spirit Winery opens; Rocky Mountain Meadery opens; Record wine grape harvest of 560 tons.
- * 1996: Canyon Wind Cellars opens; Creekside Cellars opens.
- * 1997: Aspen Valley Winery opens; Augustina's Winery opens; DeBeque Canyon Winery opens; Old Town Winery opens; Record wine grape harvest of 752 tons.
- * 1998: S. Rhodes **Vineyards** opens.
- * 1999: BookCliff **Vineyards** opens; Baharav **Vineyards** opens; St. Kathryn Cellars opens; Two Rivers Winery opens.
- * 2000: J. A. **Balistreri Vineyards** opens; scheduled to open later this year are Surface Creek Winery and Sutcliffe **Vineyards**.
- * Source: Colorado Wine Industry Development Board

INFOBOX (2)

COLORADO WINERY LOCATIONS

ADAMS COUNTY: J.A. **Balistreri Vineyards**

ARAVADA: Old Town Winery

BOULDER: Augustine's Winery

CARBONDALE: Aspen Valley Winery and Baharav Wineyards

CEDAREEDGE: Stoney Mesa Winery

COLORADO SPRINGS: Pikes Peak **Vineyards**

CORTEZ: Sutcliffe **Vineyards**

DURANGO: Rocky Mountain Meadery

ECKERT: Surface Creek

EVERGREEN: Creekside Cellars

FORT COLLINS: Shadow Mountain Cellars
HOTCHKISS: S. Rhodes **Vineyards**
LOVELAND: Trail Ridge Winery
MINTURN: Minturn Cellars
MONTROSE: Rocky Hill Winery
OLATHE: Cottonwood Cellars
PALISADE: BookCliff **Vineyards**, Canyon Wind Cellars, Carlson **Vineyards**, Colorado Cellars Winery, DeBeque Canyon Winery, Grande River **Vineyards**, Plum Creek Cellars, Rocky Mountain Meadery and St. Kathryn Cellars
PAONIA: Terror Creek Winery and Surface Creek Winery
SALIDA: Mountain Spirit Winery, Ltd.
STEAMBOAT SPRINGS: Steamboat Springs Cellars
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