



taste
290

BETWEEN JOHNSON CITY AND FREDERICKSBURG,
WINE ROAD 290 OFFERS 13 WINERIES AND TASTING ROOMS,
MANY FEATURING SPRING EVENTS

text by ANTHONY HEAD



DRIVING TO FREDERICKSBURG

from the east on US 290, it's easy to notice that spring adores the Hill Country: This oak-studded landscape is a hot spot for wildflowers—bluebonnets, firewheels, black-eyed Susans, and others color the vistas like a painting come to life, while roadside stands open in anticipation of peaches, tomatoes, blackberries, and other seasonal bounty coming to market.

In the past decade or so, vineyards have added to the appeal of driving 290 as more wineries open in the area. In the springtime, the vineyards are just beginning to flourish with new growth in advance of the grape harvest in summer and fall. But the wine itself is definitely at its peak. This I can assure you, because I've visited nearly every one of the 13 wineries and tasting rooms located along 290 between Johnson City and Fredericksburg during every season of the calendar. This stretch of road—known as “Fredericksburg Wine Road 290”—is the undisputed heart of wine tourism in Texas.

If you're coming from Austin, Texas Hills Vineyard, with a tasting room, winery, and vineyards planted mostly with Italian grapes, marks the first stop along this wine trail. Gary Gilstrap, owner and winemaker of Texas Hills, helped found the Texas Hill Country Wine Trail in 1999, tethering together dozens of wineries across the region through a series of yearly events, including food and wine pairings, designed to draw notice to the quality of Hill Country wines.

“We opened our doors at Texas Hills in 1999, on the very first day of the Texas Hill Country Wine Trail,” says Gilstrap. “But eventually, we found that the bulk of the visitor traffic was along 290, and so those of us along 290 decided to work together to form another trail.”

In 2008, Gilstrap and those other winemakers devised a new series of annual wine-centric events to be held collaboratively at wineries within five miles of 290. Those gatherings, such as the “Vino el Pastor” (wine and pork pairing) held every June, are a big draw for oenophiles, foodies, and curious first-time visitors to the area. But there's no need to wait for a special party to enjoy Wine Road 290. The wineries open year-round and, for a small fee, guests can sample several wines and even purchase a bottle or two right on the spot.

Inside Texas Hills' cozy tasting room, for example, there are more than a dozen wines available, including Gilstrap's signature wine, Kick Butt Cab. In spite of the name, this cabernet sauvignon is supple and rounded, with distinct blackberry and black cherry flavors. But if the syrah is available for tasting, I wouldn't pass it up. The wine's dark and smoky essence is a real standout for Texas.

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WHILE IT CAN BE A PERFECTLY ENCHANTING EXPERIENCE TO GET LOST IN THE HILL COUNTRY, THERE'S VERY LITTLE CHANCE OF THAT HAPPENING ON WINE ROAD 290. IT'S EASY TO NAVIGATE BECAUSE EACH OF THE WINERIES IS ACCESSIBLE DIRECTLY FROM THE HIGHWAY.



20 miles west of Johnson City, you'll find the roads leading to a pair of popular boutique wineries, Pedernales Cellars and William Chris Vineyards.

Located in Stonewall, Pedernales Cellars specializes in Spanish- and Rhône-style wines—as well as some unforgettable views of the Pedernales River Valley from its tasting room patio. In the shade of stately oak trees, visitors should not miss the opportunity to taste the tempranillo, a Spanish red grape that thrives in Texas and produces elegant, medium-bodied wines that are nearly uncontested for their food friendliness. Pedernales' viognier, a white wine with bright floral notes, is loaded with ripe stone-fruit flavors; to me, it tastes like spring itself.

Growing grapes and turning them into wine can be a back-breaking, time-consuming task, so the people involved are rightfully proud of their accomplishments. You'll often find the winemakers and grape growers in their tasting rooms answering questions, helping visitors decide which wines to try, and even leading individual tours of the wineries and vineyards. Chris Brundett, co-owner of William Chris Vineyards

FROM VINEYARD TO CASK

Above, a couple looks out over Hilmy Cellars' three-acre sangiovese plot, with the chicken house in the background. Free-roaming fowl reduce the need for pesticides. Right, wine-lovers gather to taste the latest vintages at Grape Creek Vineyards.





ESSENTIALS 290 WINE ROAD

The Fredericksburg Wine Road 290 currently features 13 wineries in and around Fredericksburg. See www.wineroad290.com for details, including links to chartered winery-themed limousine tours.

Fredericksburg offers hundreds of hotel rooms, bed-and-breakfasts, and other accommodations; call 888/997-3600; www.visitfredericksburgtx.com.

For information about the **Texas wine industry** as a whole, see www.gotexanwine.org.

POUR ON THE SUNSHINE

Longtime Becker Vineyards employee Henri DeLobbe presides over the tasting room, which opens daily. After sampling the wines at Pedernales Cellars, visitors can purchase a cheese plate and a favorite wine to enjoy on the oak-shaded patio.

in Hye, spends a lot of time in his tasting room, informing visitors as much as he can about the business of wine.

“Farming-wise, the Hill Country is a wonderful place to grow grapes,” he tells me. “It’s a perfect place to draw people in to taste wine, too, because of the surrounding beauty.”

As with many of the wineries along 290, most of William Chris’ wines are available only at the winery, making a trip to the tasting room essential to appreciate the scope of the portfolio. Actually, William Chris features a *pair* of tasting rooms, both inside the estate’s 100-year-old farmhouse. One room practically defines rustic charm, with a corrugated metal ceiling and a wooden tasting bar; the other room is a contemporary space with concrete floors, abundant windows, and a porch overlooking vineyards and oak groves. It’s a perfect backdrop to sample a glass of William Chris malbec, a red wine that’s born to pair with grilled meats.

Traveling still-closer to Fredericksburg, the countryside becomes populated with antiques stores and roadside stands, as well as the largest concentration of wineries along the trail. This cluster of seven facilities includes Becker Vineyards, perhaps the region’s best-known winery. Located within a reproduction of a 19th-Century German barn (built from local

limestone and surrounded in springtime by fields of lavender and wildflowers), Becker is certainly an alluring property. It’s also among the most well-established wineries, as it has been producing sauvignon blanc, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and other wines from its vast estate vineyards since 1992.

Just like the wines themselves, each winery boasts a different personality, everything from Texas rustic to European classic. Some offer bed-and-breakfast facilities; many feature live music on the weekends; and most host special events throughout the year, including grape-stomps in the fall. They also have tuned themselves to their surroundings, like the always-bustling Fredericksburg Winery, which sits right on the city’s Main Street amidst antiques shops, art galleries, and restaurants. In contrast, the Chisholm Trail Winery, with its Western frontier ambiance and wood-fired, brick-oven pizzas, lies all by itself, just west of Fredericksburg.

“One of the things I love about 290 is that it’s not cookie-cutter,” says Brian Heath, owner of Grape Creek Vineyards in Fredericksburg. “There are mom-and-pop wineries and bigger operations, and both Old World themes and modern architecture in the tasting rooms.”

Grape Creek’s theme is “Tuscany in Texas,” and its tasting

room, with wooden beam ceilings and a stone fireplace, resembles an Italian villa. The wines, Heath explains, are also made largely with Italian grape varieties and with Italian style: “Although we produce some single-varietal wines, we love to blend different wines, building something whole that is more impressive than its individual parts. It’s very Old World that way.” Grape Creek’s full-bodied estate wine “Epiphany” is a perfect example, with flavors of mocha, black cherry, and warm spices coming from montepulciano and aglianico grapes.

Like most other wineries, Grape Creek uses both Hill Country-grown grapes and fruit from elsewhere, including the exceptional High Plains growing region near Lubbock. That’s because different grapes grow better in different parts of the state. Changes in climate, soil, and altitude (conditions known collectively as “terroir”) all affect grapes, and such geographic characteristics infuse myriad nuances to the wines.

In that same vein, one more recent development along 290 is the addition of wineries from other parts of the state. For example, 4.0 Cellars in Fredericksburg represents not one but three Texas wineries: Brennan Vineyards in Comanche, McPherson Cellars in Lubbock, and Lost Oak Winery in Burleson. A tasting room, rather than a working winery, 4.0 Cellars allows visitors to sample wines from several highly respected wineries not located in the Hill Country—all under the same roof.

“The collaboration has been very successful for us, too,” says Pat Brennan, owner of Brennan Vineyards. “Comanche is off the beaten path, and so we don’t have the tasting-room traffic we see here in Fredericksburg. And the three of us work together very harmoniously.”

The 4.0 tasting room is one of my favorites, incorporating stone and wood features of the Hill Country into its contemporary, urbane design. It’s spacious, too, because 4.0 needs the room to offer multiple wines from the individual wineries’ collections. I *never* pass up the opportunity to enjoy McPherson’s roussanne, an aromatic white wine with a long, luxurious finish; or Lost Oak’s soft and smooth tempranillo from the High Plains; or Brennan’s Buffalo Roam, a Rhône-style blend of syrah, mourvedre, petite verdot, and ruby cabernet that I consider to be the best red wine produced in Texas last year.

“Because of the large number of wines we can offer, we change our tasting list frequently,” says Brennan, adding that beginning in April, a new selection of wines produced under the 4.0 label will be available. They include a white Rhône blend, a Nero d’Avola, a tempranillo, and a cabernet sauvignon.

Of course, *every* year brings new wines and new wineries to this quickly growing region, which means touring Fredericksburg Wine Road 290 is never just a one-off. And for serious oenophiles, it’s also not just a quick day trip.

“You used to be able to do all the wineries in a day; now it’s wise to take a couple days and thoroughly explore each venue,” says Gary Gilstrap of Texas Hills. “Plus, the region’s growing—*fast*. And we don’t mind that there are more wineries coming. We like to work together. It’s a synergistic business, and we love the synergy that wines have created in the Hill Country.” ★

Writer Anthony Head is the Texas editor of The Tasting Panel magazine, a trade publication for the spirits industry. Brennan Vineyards’ Buffalo Roam and McPherson Cellars’ Roussanne Reserve are among his favorite wines.