

*In the Dry, Windy High  
Plains AVA, Texas Vintners  
Are Determined to Create  
American Wine History*

# Pay DIRT

*by Anthony Head / photos by Kirk Weddle*

**HIGH PLAINS DRIVERS:**  
*Cliff Bingham (left),  
Neal Newsom (seated)  
and Vijay Reddy.*



Comprising eight million West Texas acres, the High Plains AVA is not the prettiest of wine countries. Near Lubbock, for example, it's flat as a board—from horizon to horizon there's hardly a geographic blip of the topography, other than the gentlest of slopes and the occasional pumpjack drawing up the last few drops of crude oil from beneath this windswept landscape. Still, it's where a swelling number of award-winning Texas wines begin.

The semi-arid climate and altitudes ranging from 3,000 to 4,100 feet bring hot summer days and cool nights. There is also good soil. "It's a sandy loam type soil. Porous, easy to work with. You can grow any crop in this," says Vijay Reddy, who has a Ph.D. in soil chemistry and soil science and has been farming commodity crops in this area since 1979; Reddy Vineyards, in Brownfield, has 280 acres planted to grapes. "Beneath the surface it's of a calcareous nature, it's caliche. That's good for grapes."

In total, the AVA has about 4,000 acres

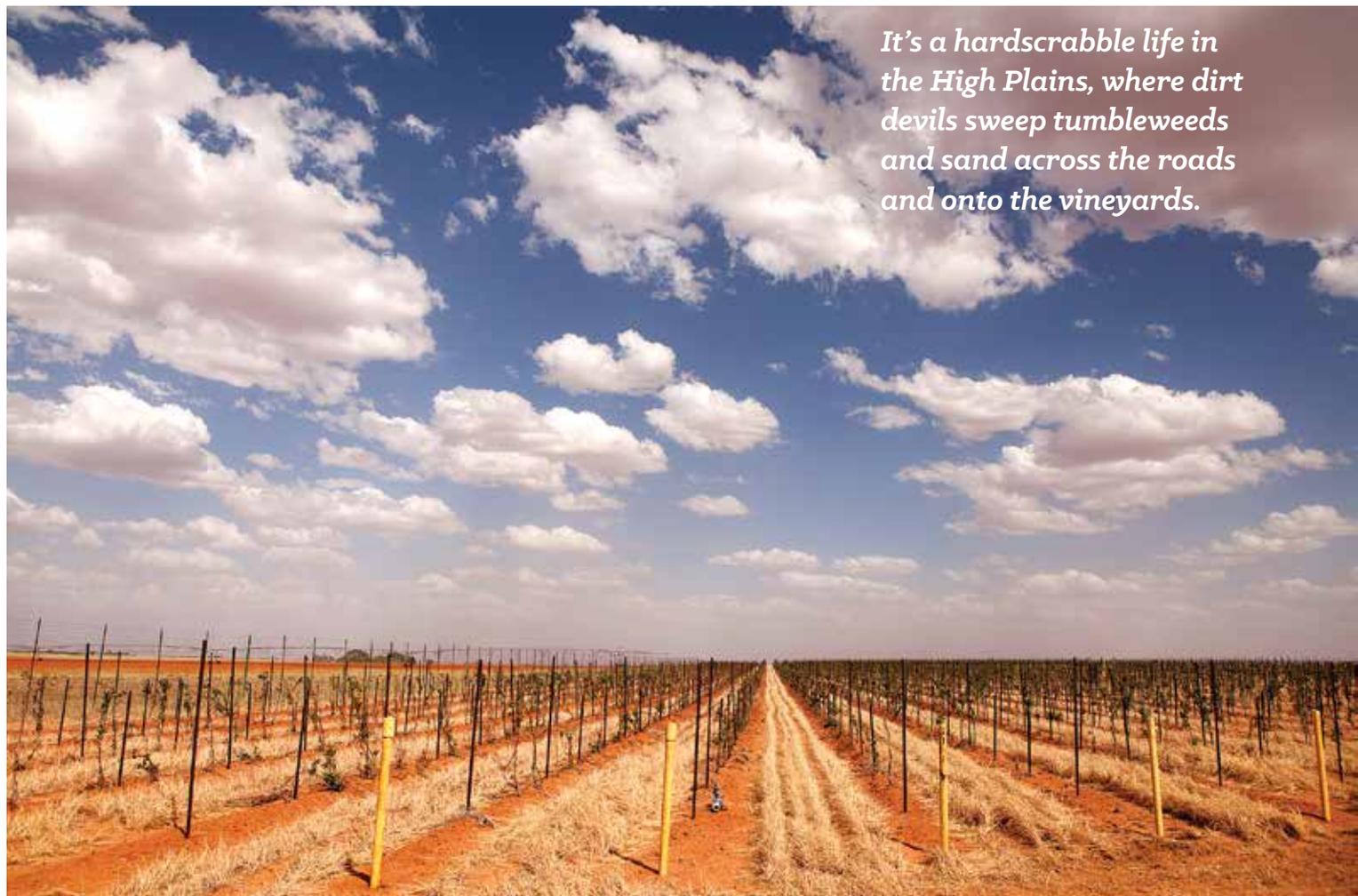
under vine from around 30 growers, and Reddy is representative of area farmers choosing to convert (or forego planting altogether) cotton, sorghum and peanuts in favor of wine grapes, which provide better financial returns and require less water. (Water is still critical here, though. This severe landscape is very dry and most vineyards are irrigated from the Ogallala Aquifer, which has less-than-ideal recharge rates because of increased usage coinciding with an ongoing drought.)

In recent years, growers suffered through spring frosts, a danger to budding vines, in 2007, 2009, 2011 and 2013, the latter of which brought many growers near-100-percent losses.

Then last April 15, there was an overnight drop in temperatures from the mid-30s to mid-20s, leading to another lost vintage for some, as was evident during my trip to the region near Lubbock about a month later. But there were also some big developments. Cliff Bingham, of Bingham Family Farms in Meadow, packed nutrient-rich



*Talk about gnarly!*



*It's a hardscrabble life in the High Plains, where dirt devils sweep tumbleweeds and sand across the roads and onto the vineyards.*



soils and compost around the base of his vines as one measure against frost. “We also delayed pruning to delay bud break, and we’re thrilled with what we’re seeing, even after a late frost,” he told me last as we drove from one of his healthy-looking vineyard block to another.

Other growers burned hay bales alongside their vineyards while others drove trucks between rows with burning hay on the flatbeds. A few hired helicopters to hover above the vineyards, forcing hot air back down. But for the first time (and in a somewhat ironic development for such a windy place) high-powered wind machines were installed to circulate air and achieve a four-degree rise in temperatures.

“We got them in around March 15, right in the nick of time,” said Andy Timmons of Lost Draw Vineyards in Brownfield. “I used to come out and just deal with the losses. But now that I’ve got this protection . . .” He didn’t need to finish the thought; while touring his vineyard, the evidence was plain: Viognier vines were demonstrably healthier (and *alive*) within the ten-acre range of each machine.

And High Plains Viognier is a coveted grape after previous vintages produced international awards; the same goes for Tempranillo, which is considered the state’s great red hope. *SJ*

# Newsom Grape Day

On May 9, Neal Newsom, of Newsom Vineyards in Plains, hosted his annual gathering of growers, winemakers and suppliers. A crowd of about 250 attended this year’s Newsom Grape Day featuring a special Tempranillo Symposium, which makes sense because—although the grape has only recently caught fire with most Texas winemakers—Newsom has been growing Tempranillo since the 1990s.

Although reliable acreage numbers are hard to come by, there may be up to 400 acres of Tempranillo planted in Texas, with more coming each year because of the grape’s fine adaptability to the climate. That doesn’t come close to California’s 800-plus acres; and when it comes to Spain, where the grape originates, Dr. Ed Hellman, Professor of Viticulture at Texas Tech University and the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, brought some perspective to the symposium: “It’s hard to fathom half a million acres of one variety of grape—in one country that’s smaller than Texas.” But that’s what’s in Spain.

So there’s room to grow and, indeed, many of Texas’s new vineyards are appearing in the High Plains and including Tempranillo. What there aren’t too many of, yet, are wineries in the immediate area. Bobby Cox, founder of the historic Pheasant Ridge Winery in Lubbock and consultant (both formal and informal) to many area growers, said not to expect a “wine trail” for tourists anytime soon: “We don’t have the other amenities, not really, anyway. Right now, there’s no real synergy. You could have a wine trail, but it’d be a long, lonely drive sometimes.”

Cox and others know that that day is coming, but there are other problems, like hail and drought and frost, to contend with now. It’s a hard-scrabble life in the High Plains, where dirt devils sweep tumbleweeds and sand across the roads and onto the vineyards—but that’s not, apparently, much of a deterrent anymore.

“There’s over 600 new acres planted this year, after two of the worst weather years in recent history,” grower Cliff Bingham had told me earlier. “What’s that say about our commitment in the High Plains? We’re either crazy, stupid, foolish . . . or there’s something pretty special going on here.”



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