

**NMSU joins handful of colleges with new signature wine**

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — New Mexico State University on Thursday joined Wake Forest, James Madison and a handful of other schools in the U.S. that have their own signature wines.

The school's announcement of its new licensing venture with Lescombes family vineyards comes as universities across the country search for creative ways to generate more revenue as the pandemic has put a dent in enrollment and upended athletic programs.

The new cabernet — Crimson Legacy — from New Mexico's oldest institution of higher learning follows the successful launch in 2017 of Pistol Pete's 1888 Ale. The award-winning beer is sold in 300 locations around the state, with a portion of the licensing fees going to support intercollegiate athletics and student athletes.

The conversation to join the wine business began shortly after the beer's launch, but Aggie Athletics Director Mario Moccia said the effort really didn't get going until a few months ago when school officials and the experts at Lescombes identified a wine for the project.

"It's great for us, especially in this time of uncertainty, that we can roll out something that's fun and unique and exciting. I'm just happy that it's taken off," Moccia told The Associated Press.

With rich, rustic berry flavors and a hint of cocoa, the new libation also pays homage to a 400-year history of wine making in New Mexico that began with Spanish missionaries intent on spreading Christianity. The back of the bottle details some of that history along with the role played by the agriculture-focused university during more recent decades.

Rebecca Lescombes, an Aggie alum, said the state's hot, dry days and cool nights are perfect for growing red wine grapes.

"They're really adapted very well to this climate so it was natural that we use one of our best grapes for this wine," she said.

While the Spanish missionaries helped to establish vineyards up and down the Rio Grande Valley centuries ago, Lescombes said grape growing began to wane in the early 1900s during the Prohibition and Depression eras. It wasn't until European investors began to search for new opportunities decades later that New Mexico and its favorable climate popped up on the radar.

The university's new wine will be available at Lescombes locations around the state, and NMSU Chancellor Dan Arvizu said it will be the signature wine served at the university's special events. Lescombes also is working on a distribution plan.

NMSU has balanced its budget in recent years, but officials have acknowledged that reserves and the margin of error are getting thinner every year.

And while the last fiscal year was bolstered by increases in ticket sales and fundraising revenues, that will not be the case this year. NMSU announced in August it was postponing the football season due to the pandemic and would explore the possibility of playing in the spring. Moccia said the wine will certainly have a place at the stadium's skybox and suites when games resume.

The pandemic has been a challenge for many big schools with the cancelation of games resulting in tens of millions of dollars in lost ticket revenue. Some schools have cut sports from their programs, while coaches and staff have taken pay cuts and student stipends have evaporated.

The wine is a way for fans to "rally around NMSU and our legacy activities as well as those things I think ultimately represent who we are," Arvizu said, noting that a little extra revenue won't hurt.