

BUSINESS

## County officials say Argentina trip yields benefits



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[BEERLING@NAPANews.COM](mailto:BEERLING@NAPANews.COM)

Two Napa County supervisors see a county-funded 6,000-mile trip they took to an international wine conference in Argentina as reaping benefits for Napa's world-famous wine industry.

Supervisors Mark Luce and Brad Wagenknecht and county Agricultural Commissioner Greg Clark joined a local contingent that went to the Great Wine Capitals General Assembly in Mendoza, Argentina, from Nov. 2 to Nov. 7. The county allotted up to \$17,500 for the three government participants.

Traveling to another celebrated wine region by its nature lends glamour to a trip. But local officials say the annual Great Wine Capitals trips are important because of the global nature of Napa County's wine business.

"You want your decision-makers to be broad thinkers and this broadens your experience and knowledge in those three areas that are extremely important to Napa – the relationship between

tourism, government and agriculture," Luce said last week.

San Francisco-Napa Valley is one of 10 areas worldwide that is a member of Great Wine Capitals. Other members are Bordeaux, France; Cape Town, South Africa; Firenze, Italy; Mainz-Rheinhessen, Germany; Mendoza, Argentina; Porto, Portugal; Bilbao-Rioja, Spain; Casablanca Valley, Chile; and Christchurch-South Island, New Zealand.

Only one area from a country can be a Great Wine Capital member.

"If Napa is not the great wine capital of the United States, then Sonoma or somebody else will be," Luce said.

Napa County has sent representatives to host cities for the annual Great Wine Capitals conferences for most of the last decade. Exceptions were 2005 and last year, when San Francisco-Napa Valley was the host and the local representatives didn't have to travel.

Also traveling to Argentina for this year's conference — not at the county's expense — were representatives from Napa Valley Vintners, Visit Napa Valley and San Francisco Travel.

Mendoza is a city on the eastern slopes of the Andes that has staked its own claim to wine fame.

The conference schedule included working sessions among tourism, communication and business and education committees, a tour of Mendoza and a welcome reception at Mendoza City Hall, speakers such as Mendoza tourism minister Javier Espina, a meeting with the National Viticulture Institute director, winery tours and a tourism workshop.

The Napa contingent visited wineries large and small to see how they made their wines and interacted with visitors, Luce said. Mendoza officials expressed interest in forming a “sister city” arrangement with Napa County, he said.

“It’s a good way to put all of what we do in perspective,” Luce said.

He doesn’t see cutthroat competition among the Great Wine Capitals members as they vie for the world wine market.

“I think we view each other as partners and allies,” Luce said. “It’s the premium wine market. I think we view it as we are all successful and we help each other be successful.”

Wagenknecht said the trips help officials look more broadly at wine issues than simply the way Napa County has always done things.

“There are other successful regions in the world,” he said. “To me, this is about making wine region as good for the community as we can make it and as successful for the community as we can make it. These are the best wine regions in the world that we’re visiting and to pick their brains for a week is a treasure.”

He talked about different wine industry regulations in other countries and how they can help inform Napa County’s discussions on regulations.

“We’re getting to witness how all of that works and how that works on a global stage,” he said.

Rex Stults of Napa Valley Vintners has made trips to the conferences on behalf of his organization, though another official went this year. He described how the St. Helena Chamber of Commerce previously had a relationship with Libourne, France. That helped spark a search in the early 2000s for an international wine organization.

The search led to the Great Wine Capitals, which had formed in 1999.

“It was exactly what we envisioned,” Stults said. “It already existed. It was well-organized. It had meaningfulness, it wasn’t just a party. And it had legs.”

Stults sees the Great Wine Capitals trip as worthwhile for Napa County government, even at a \$17,500 cost.

Napa County benefited from its Great Wine Capitals connections a few years ago when the local European grapevine moth infestation broke out. Officials from Italy had already dealt with the pest and advised how to defeat it, Stults said.

“That in itself is probably worth way more than \$17,500 a year and in perpetuity,” Stults said.

Plus, the wine industry is a \$13 billion annual industry in Napa. County leadership is trying to

get a better understanding of the county's economic engine, he said.

The Great Wines Capitals conference included the presentation of International Best of Wine Tourism awards. Judges looked at 343 applications and included Hall Wines of St. Helena among the eight winners. A news release praised Hall Wines for its energy-efficient center and winery, its renovated, historic Bergfeld winery building and its art collection.