

A photograph of Raymond Haak, owner and winemaker of Haak Winery & Vineyards, sitting in a wine cellar. He is wearing a blue patterned short-sleeved shirt and dark pants, with his arms crossed. The cellar is filled with wooden racks of wine bottles, some of which are labeled "BIN NO. 37". A metal mesh gate is visible in the background.

Raymond Haak,
owner and wine-
maker of Haak
Winery & Vineyards,
in Santa Fe, Texas,
is a master of the
Blanc du Bois grape.

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I'm sorry, Florida. In July, I stated (*boasted, really*) that Texas's winemaking history from the 1600s pre-dates all others in the country. Eric Hemer, Educational Director and Master Sommelier for Southern Wine & Spirits of Florida, promptly took me to the woodshed with documentation of Sunshine State Spaniards making wine in 1565. Well, after some deep research by both Hemer and myself, we have settled on declaring that, in fact, French Huguenots were first making wine near what is now Jacksonville, Florida, in 1564.

With the *mea culpa* out of the way, I want to take this opportunity and say "Thank you" to Florida for the Blanc du Bois grape, another monumental wine feat with a French connection.

This white grape was developed during the late 1960s and early 1970s at the University of Florida's Central Florida Research and Education Center, in Leesburg, Florida. Named in honor of Emile DuBois, a Frenchman who came to Florida in 1882 and boosted the state's wine industry, Blanc du Bois proved to be a vigorous grower, an early ripener, and resistant to Pierce's disease. The last trait was of particular interest to Florida vintners, since this vine-killing bacterium gets a pretty good foothold in the vineyards of hot and humid states.

Just like Texas. At least *some* parts of Texas, where Pierce's disease has caused millions of dollars in losses to the state's wine industry. Depending on the region, it can be the greatest limiting factor for commercial grape production. One of the first Texans to give Blanc du Bois a shot was Raymond Haak, owner and winemaker of Haak Winery & Vineyards, in Santa Fe, Texas. Sometime in the late 1980s, he says, he planted Blanc du Bois in an area about ten miles, as the heron flies, away from Galveston and the Gulf of Mexico. In addition to braving the great humidity, his three-acre vineyard has endured its fair share of hurricane activity. And endured it rather well: Raymond hasn't lost a single vine to a storm yet.

He's done something else: He's crafted a truly delicious white wine from Blanc du Bois. His 2008 100-percent Blanc du Bois is pleasingly dry and shows true character of the varietal with grapefruit, pear and bright Muscat;

Raymond gauges its weight as similar to that of dry Riesling. "Our cool fermentation retains a lot of the aromatic profiles, too. I get green apple, grapefruit and a little citrus," he says. "It's an incredible wine for seafood."

His 2009 vintage was cut with 25 percent Chenin Blanc and has the spirit of a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc. But it's a proven stand-alone varietal, and as an engineer by trade, Raymond wants to know what the flavor profile is truly capable of becoming before he gets seriously into blending it. In addition to a semi-sweet version (which sells best in Texas, naturally) he also brings out a Reserve that is stirred frequently in American oak for three months and is much more luscious. Both his White Port and his Madeira rest in American oak as well, and round out the Blanc du Bois category with true style.

The latter is a special point of pride, because not only is it warmed in a traditional Portuguese oven, but also, Raymond says, his elegant fortified wine is destined to be known as the "first and only" Madeira made in Texas. In November 2006, he learned the American government agreed with the European Union to limit the name "Madeira" on labels outside of Portugal's Madeira Islands. "I'm the only guy in Texas who can put Madeira on the label. I'm grandfathered in, unless they change the law," he says proudly.

He is also, clearly, a Texas pioneer in Blanc du Bois, and though I'm not saying he was the first in the state (I'll not be bitten by that snake again), he was certainly among the earliest to make a go of commercial winemaking with the new grape. He's also become something of a standard-bearer. "People just don't feel like they have to take it seriously. This has *vinifera* in its parentage, but it's still a hybrid grape," Raymond says, adding with a laugh, "an ugly step-child."

It's still a boutique varietal in Texas, so to introduce it to a wider audience, Raymond says he's pushing to see more wine competitions include a category for this grape. Having tasted what this Southern Belle is capable of, I'd just love to see more restaurants along the Gulf Coast, between Galveston and Miami, serving Blanc du Bois as their house white. And heck, let's just go on and extend that point of demarcation up the Florida coast to Jacksonville and to my friend Eric. ■■

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BORN IN THE SUSHINE STATE, **BLANC DU BOIS** THRIVES IN TEXAS

by Anthony Head / photo by Kirk Weddle