



Taste of Texas

California winemaker Fess Parker returns to Big Country for three-day food and wine summit at Buffalo Gap

By Janet Van Vleet □ Reporter-News Staff Writer

From killing "a b'ar when he was only three" to making wines may seem an odd leap, but to actor/developer/vintner Fess Parker, it just makes sense.

"There's a creative connection to all of them," Parker said in a telephone interview from California. "It's really exciting. You can see something with each of them."

Known to baby boomers and their parents from his television roles as Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone, Parker now makes wines in Santa Barbara County, Calif., with his son and daughter.

Parker, who attended Hardin-Simmons University for a year before finding Hollywood fame, returns to Abilene as a winemaker April 22. He and fellow California winemakers from Rombauer Vineyards join Texas winemakers and chefs for the first Buffalo Gap Wine & Food Summit, a three-day event.

The idea for the summit originated with Parker, said Lisa Perini.

"This whole thing is his fault," she said with a laugh. Perini and her husband, Tom Perini, owners of Perini Ranch Steakhouse, were chatting with Parker during a visit to Austin two years ago. "He said 'Buffalo Gap is such a neat place, we ought to have a wine thing.'"

Parker laughed when he heard her version of the birth of the summit.

"Well, actually we had a nice talk, and we decided that Buffalo Gap is such a unique place, and Tom and Lisa are such wonderful people, we decided it would be fun to get together some Texas winemakers and some winemakers from my part of the county — the camaraderie of people who enjoy wine and consuming it along with that good Perini beef."

Partnering with Parker and the Perinis is Dr. Richard Becker, owner of Becker Vineyards near Fredericksburg. "I like the idea of bringing Texas winemakers and California winemakers together," Becker said. "To pour Texas and California wines together and compare them."

Becker is excited about the summit and what he hopes will become an annual event.

"It's going to be small, in kind of an exotic, eccentric place," he said. "I think Tom Perini is one of the best chefs in the world. He just happens to be in Buffalo Gap."

Tom Perini has been invited in the past to the James Beard House in New York and to the White House. He poured Becker wines to accompany his meals, something

Becker appreciates, he said.

The partnership of Perini, Becker and Parker share a commonality beyond good wine and good food. They all share a history in Abilene.

Becker grew up here and attended Abilene High. Before Parker gained international fame as the man in the coonskin cap, the onetime San Angeloan played football at HSU before transferring to the University of Texas.

"Some of my lifelong friends live in Abilene," Parker said, mentioning Jimmy Tittle, Bob Milstead and Phil Kendrick. They used to hang out together at the Clinic Pharmacy. He still returns now and again to visit old friends.

"I like the people there," Parker said. "I can't say Abilene is beautiful, but in the summer, with the moon out among the mesquite trees — I've enjoyed a lot of the evenings of West Texas."

But he left Texas far behind many years ago, first for Hollywood, and later on, to the Santa Barbara area.

Parker spent much of his acting career either in a coonskin cap or on the back of a horse.

In 1954, Parker began his partnership with Disney, taking on the title role in "Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier." The show set off a craze that saw millions of American children sprouting coonskin caps and singing the theme song.

That song, "The Ballad of Davy Crockett," ended up on the Billboard charts three times in 1955, when different singers — Bill Hayes, Tennessee Ernie Ford and Parker — recorded it.

Parker's version reached No. 5 on the charts and stayed there for 17 weeks.

In 1957 Parker starred as the father, Jim Coates, in Disney's classic film "Old Yeller."

While Parker acted in dozens of films, most people remember him for his TV roles as Crockett and of Daniel Boone on a series that ran from 1964 to 1970.

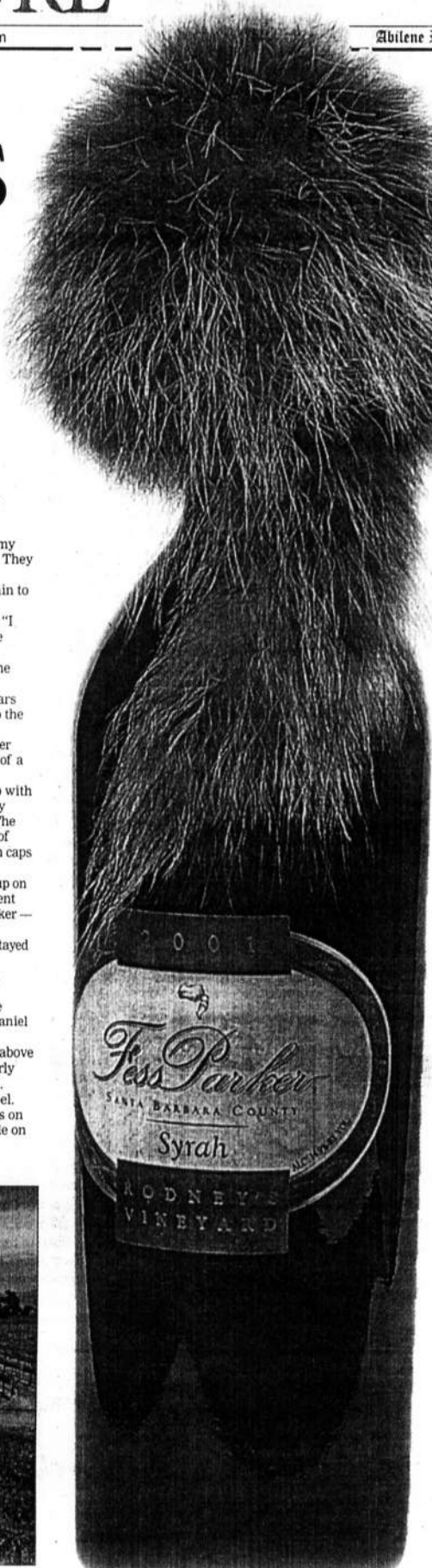
Parker acknowledges that on his wine labels, just about his name on the label, a small gold coonskin cap nearby blends in with the tan, antiques-looking background.

"My family was unanimous on the Fess Parker label. It's a little subdued, fighting with all the bright colors on labels these days, but we thought if you put this bottle on

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Courtesy photo
Fess Parker as Daniel Boone.



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a dinner table it's not so intrusive."

He made his last film, "Climb an Angry Mountain," in 1972. He got into real estate development in the Santa Barbara area and built his first resort in Santa Barbara in 1986.

In 1987, he bought the land in Santa Rita Hills that would eventually house the Fess Parker Winery & Vineyards, a family project that includes Parker's son Eli Parker, his daughter Ashley Parker Snider and his son-in-law Tim Snider. They produced their first bottle of wine in 1989.

"It's not so different from the acting world, I found out much to my surprise when we got into the wine business," he said. "The distributors, all the people — they want a story. It's the same way in films — how are you going to play it?"

Another film — that did not star Parker — recently brought exposure to the winery and the area.

"Sideways," nominated for five Academy Awards (it won for Best Adapted Screenplay), not only takes place in the wine country near Santa Barbara, scenes were actually filmed in Parker's winery.

"Our little inn here is at 100 percent capacity this week and next week," Parker said.

While he thought the film

was a little extreme, he said it had good moments.

"I thought the scene when Virginia Madsen talked about how she developed her love of wine, for one," Parker said.

Pinot noir wine, another star of the film, is one of Parker's specialties.

"There are only three places in the United States that can compete with France in pinot noir," he said. "Here in Santa Rita Hills, the Sonora coast and a little bit of the Russian River Country."

While their chardonnay does well and they can grow cabernet grapes, Parker said the area has a lot of strength with pinot noir, syrah and viognier.

"I prefer the battlefield of pinot noir."

Flavor 101 — Umami (seminar)

Ranch Steakhouse with her husband Tom Perini.

"It's the indescribable, 'Oh, my God' — whatever it is to you," she said.

During Flavor 101 — Umami, a seminar devoted to the elusive "fifth taste," or umami (derived from the Japanese word umai, which means "fifth taste"), each participant will be given a painter's palette with bites of beef and various sauces.

The beef is dipped in a sauce

and eaten.

Then a wine is tried to see how wine changes the taste of the meat and how food changes the taste of the wine.

"Of course, we have beef, because we believe in beef," Lisa Perini said. "Part of this is to limit the intimidation factor of wine. It doesn't have to be intimidating."

The seminar is being presented by Tiffany Collins with the Texas Beef Council.

The Texas/California Taste Off (seminar)

Where: Perini Ranch Steakhouse, Buffalo Gap.

When: 3 p.m., April 23.

Cost: \$40. For more information, visit www.periniranch.com or call (800) 367-1721.

What's going on: Both Texas and California are big, boastful and full of good wines. But how do the two stand up side

by side?

In the spirit of the friendly frontier, participants in this seminar will decide just that. Wines from Texas wineries Becker Vineyards, Fall Creek Vineyards, Flat Creek Estate and Llano Estacado Winery come up against wines from Fess Parker Winery & Vineyard and Rombauer

Vineyards in California.

Each wine will be matched with similar varietals to demonstrate how the same grapes can produce different tasting wines depending on the climate in which they are grown.

The winemakers will present their finest wines, choices that represent their wineries.

Cowboys, Cuisine & Cabernet (dinner and dance)

Where: Perini Ranch Steakhouse, Buffalo Gap

When: 7 p.m. April 23.

Cost: \$115, for more information, visit www.periniranch.com or call (800) 367-1721.

What's going on: Taste food and wines under the stars of the West Texas sky as Texas chefs create a menu of dishes complemented by wines chosen by the winemakers.

Adding flavor to the event is the band Slim Chance and the Survivors, which will play music

for dining and dancing.

The chefs for the event are Jeff Blank of Hudson's on the Bend in Austin; Matt Martinez from Matt's Rancho Martinez in Dallas; Michael Thomson of Michael's Restaurant in Fort Worth; Tom Perini of Perini's Ranch Steakhouse in Buffalo Gap; Grady Spears, author of "Texas Cowboy Kitchen"; Paula Lambert from The Mozzarella Company in Dallas; and Pam Goble of Candies by Vletas in Abilene.

Wines for the dinner come from California and Texas wineries, including Becker Vineyards, Fall Creek Vineyards, Flat Creek Estate, Llano Estacado Winery, Fess Parker Winery & Vineyard and Rombauer Vineyards.

"Texas wines have come a long way," said Lisa Perini of Perini Ranch Steakhouse. "It's real fun introducing them to people who don't think Texas wineries are ready to pour good wines — but they are."

Buffalo Gap Wine & Food Summit

Where: Perini Ranch Steakhouse, Buffalo Gap.

When: Various times, April 22-24.

Cost: \$40 each for seminars April 23, \$115 for dinner April 23, \$300 for patron package, which includes a Friday evening cocktail party, the seminars, Saturday dinner, Sunday brunch and a panel discussion with the winemakers.