

Born TO Farm

In Texas' High Plains, Cliff Bingham
has made viticulture a family affair.

In the tiny West Texas farming community of Meadow, the only thing more prevalent than rows of cotton are dust storms and tumbleweeds. The town doesn't exactly evoke the lush, grassy image its name suggests. Instead, you'll find long stretches of road—some paved, some unpaved—connecting expansive farms along flatlands of cracked earth and circular crop sprinklers. It's no Napa. But it's home to one of the most prolific vineyards in Texas—Bingham Family Vineyards.

More likely than not, if you've had Texas wine, you've tasted the work of grape grower Cliff Bingham. Bingham and his wife, Betty, run one of the largest of a handful of vineyards in the High Plains AVA which collectively supply almost 75 percent of Texas' wine grapes. Bingham Family Vineyards is located about 30 miles from the airport in Lubbock in what might feel like the middle of nowhere to an out-of-towner (GPS won't do much good in finding it, as the last part of the drive is on dirt roads). But turn into the Bingham's homestead at the lone metal mailbox on a rural dusty road, and nowhere quickly transforms into somewhere. A wide-smiling, sun-weathered Cliff Bingham is waiting to greet visitors with a sturdy handshake, while the team of 11 Bingham children (ages 9 to 28) maneuvers through the nearby vineyard and farmhouse. Together they seem to mimic the pacing of a well-practiced orchestra—fitting, considering they're all classically trained string musicians. The comfortable, yet stately Bingham home sits on a small rise on the vineyard property. In the spring, the family spends its days planting new vineyards, and by late summer, it's all hands on deck for harvest, which runs in shifts all day and through the night.

Story by Jessica Dupuy
Photo by Artie Limmer



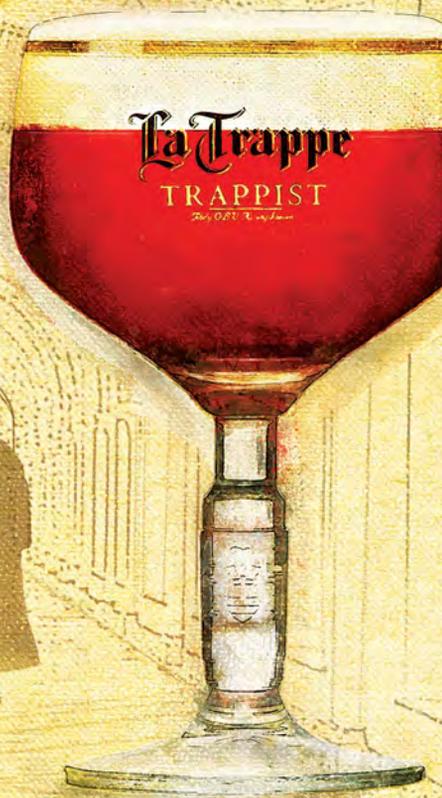
HOLLAND'S ONLY TRAPPIST ALE

Since 1884, the monks of La Trappe have brewed their Trappist Ales with care and a strong sense of place and community. La Trappe is meant to be enjoyed as it is made—*thoughtfully*.

www.latrappe.nl



Dubbel | Tripel | Quadrupel
Witte | Isid'or | LA TRAPPE



Taste the Silence

	EXCLUSIVE	512.440.0811
	U.S. IMPORTER AUSTIN, TEXAS	
www.artisanalimports.com		
f Artisanal Imports @ArtisanalBeers		

Cliff Bingham continued

Sowing the Seeds

Farming is in Cliff Bingham's blood. He's a fourth-generation cotton farmer whose family has farmed this area for more than a century. "I was one of those kids that every time school was out, as fast as I could, I would hop on a tractor with my dad," he says. By the age of 10, he was driving a tractor on his own, which wasn't uncommon for other farming kids at that time. He even remembers hauling a grain truck into town when he was 13. "I had such a passion for it," says Bingham, now 52. "There was something about the earth, the plants, the growing seasons. It was the fact that I was an integral part of nurturing this little plant to grow to do what nature wants it to do. There's no greater reward than seeing that happen from season to season."

Cliff met his wife Betty at Texas Tech University in Lubbock while earning a degree in business and entomology. "I already knew how to farm," he says. "I figured I needed to study two things that can be a challenge for farmers: business and bugs." They married right out of college and began renting cotton farms to work while they saved money for their own property. But cotton takes a lot of nutrients from the earth, not to mention the water in the High Plains that is becoming harder and harder to find. This put Bingham on a hunt for an alternative crop. "We tried to find some viable crop that would put organic matter back into the soil," says Bingham who tried garbanzo beans, black-eyed peas, guar and blue corn before he zeroed in on peanuts to supplement his cotton crop. "I want my land to be in better shape when I'm finished with it than when I found it, for my kids and grandkids."

Today, the Bingham farm more than 2,000 acres of organic cotton and peanuts. So how did grapes enter the picture? To hear Bingham tell it, it had a little to do with his farming experience and a lot to do with providence. Taking the lead from local farming friends Jet Wilmeth and Neal Newsom, who had each successfully jumped into the grape-growing industry in the late 1990s, Bingham did some investigating. "I really respected what these guys were doing, but I knew nothing about it," he says.

Enter Bobby Cox, a gregarious and affable High Plains fixture in the Texas wine industry who first planted grapes in the sandy-loam soil in 1972. As a self-proclaimed "winegrower," Cox has since owned and sold a winery, started his own set of vineyards and currently acts as a consultant to a number of grape growers throughout Texas. "Bobby Cox was an absolute godsend," says Bingham, and at just the right time. Cox needed a skilled farmer with an efficient system who was willing to jump into the grape trade to help meet the rising demand for Texas fruit. "He knew I didn't know a thing about grapes, and that's just what he was looking for—someone who could be coached by him and just get the vineyards planted."

In 2004, Bingham planted five acres primarily with Viognier. But planting the vineyard was only half the battle. He needed to find buyers for his grapes. Through Cox's network, Bingham was able to convince Dr. Richard Becker of one of Texas' most respected wineries, Becker Vineyards, to give him a chance. "But it was under one

condition,” says Bingham. “We had to do whatever Bobby told us to do with the vineyard.”

Bingham honored that condition, and he still does to this day: About 90 percent of what you see at Bingham Family Vineyards took place under Cox’s direction. But what started as five acres in 2004 and one winery account has quickly expanded into more than 225 acres for 2012 and contracts with more than 20 wineries. “The demand has skyrocketed in the past few years,” says Bingham, who has committed to planting only eight additional acres in 2013. “There’s no telling how many wineries I’ve had to turn down just so we can maintain what we’re doing now.”

While Bingham still manages his cotton and peanut farming business as well, he estimates that he’s able to make about 10 times the profit with grapes using the same amount of water that he has to use for his other crops. “We’ve seen the writing on the wall that cotton is not going to be a viable crop for us in the future,” he says. “And a lot of other farmers have figured that out too. My hope is that farms will let go of the water used for farming cotton so that those of us growing grapes can grow more.”

Happy Grapes

While Cox has played an integral role in the story of Texas wine, many would argue that the real reason Bingham has been so successful is because of his love for agriculture—that same passion that called him to ride tractors when he was just a boy. “Cliff Bingham is a joy to work with because he clearly loves to grow grapes,” says Dave Reilly, head winemaker for the award-winning Duchman Family Winery. “The proof is in the happy grapes he delivers to us each year. Happy grapes make it easy to make great wine.”

Duchman Family Winery contracts the lion’s share of Bingham’s grapes to fulfill its predominantly Italian wine portfolio, but other wineries have taken interest as well, especially after 2012’s bountiful crop. Bingham grows more than 20 varietals with a heavy emphasis on Viognier and Tempranillo, which Texas has claimed as its star white and red varietals. You’ll find two rows of Cabernet Sauvignon in Bingham’s vineyards, but for the most part, he sticks to warm-climate grapes—another tip from Bobby Cox.

The Bingham’s pride in their vineyard is tangible, but their greatest joy is seeing their children join the family business. Each child owns shares of the family corporation with the option to join when and if they’re ready. So far, all six of the oldest have jumped on board to help with planting, harvest, vine management and grape analysis. Their oldest son, Clint, now serves as the general manager for the entire operation, which gives Cliff the opportunity to focus less on administrative tasks and more on his first love: farming. “We give our children a choice,” says Bingham. “We’ve created a corporation out of Bingham Family Vineyards, and all of them can opt to be a part of it somehow. As soon as one of them decides they don’t want to be part of it, it will be a real awakening. I probably take for granted how special it is to be able to work with your kids.”

When asked what he thinks of his rapid success in his wine business, Bingham shakes his head and grins. “This is just typical of how life has been for Betty and me. If you had asked us 30 years ago if we’d have 11 children and more than 200 acres of vineyards planted, we’d have been shocked. I’m so thankful for our story. We’ve been so blessed with every step along the way.” ■

Respect your Elders Simply the Finest Martinique Rum Since 1845

Rhum J.M.
RhumJMUSA.com