

# North Coast plays host to 20 Cuban sommeliers

## Tour organizer: Emerging Cuban private sector wants better wine

By GARY QUACKENBUSH

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NORTH BAY – With a primary goal of building lasting personal and professional friendships between the U.S. and Cuban wine communities, 20 sommeliers from the Caribbean island sampled California wines during a North Coast tour July 20–26.

Called the Cuban Sommelier Summit, this first-of-its-kind cultural exchange was organized by Californians Building Bridges' "people-to-people" program in collaboration with co-hosts the Wine Institute, Napa Valley Vintners and Sonoma County Vintners.

Since receiving its first humanitarian license in 2010, Californians Building Bridges has led more than 30 exchanges and brought more than 350 American travelers to Cuba for art, religion and musical exchanges.

The nonprofit organization is headed by President Darius Anderson, also managing member of *Business Journal* owner Sonoma Media Investments, and Executive Director Holly Fraumeni with support from project manager Jennifer Davis.

More than 20 wineries stepped up to offer on-site tours and several others were included at group tastings, such as the Monday morning walk-around tasting with wines from Paso Robles, Santa Barbara and Lodi viticultural areas at the Ramekins Culinary Center, followed by lunch featuring Wente Vineyards wines.

Dinners were set at Buena Vista Winery, Charlie Palmer's Dry Creek Kitchen, Napa Valley Country Club and Beringer Winery.

Special guest speakers had been enlisted to provide Wine Country perspectives, including Geoff Kruth of the Guild of Sommeliers, Michael Mondavi, as well as Ed Gomez of Russian Hill Estate Winery.

"When I visited Cuba in 2002, I realized that there was growing desire

and demand for California wines on the island," said Ms. Fraumeni, who today is also in charge

of the CBB's "Project Havana." "In 2009 I went to Cuba again with a group from the California Wine Institute. We visited and met with sommeliers at local paladars (quality private, home-based restaurants) and hotel dining rooms. These sommeliers were eager to learn more about the California wine industry."

In 2002, there were only a few paladars in Cuba, far fewer than there are today. Members of the visiting sommelier group who work at these paladars are potential sales conduits of California wines.

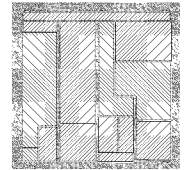
In 2000, former President Clinton lifted the 40-year-old ban on exporting goods to Cuba to allow shipments of food and medicine.

"Today, the export of U.S. wines into Cuba does not violate federal trade policies toward Cuba, but it has to be conducted in full compliance with U.S. and international law," Ms. Fraumeni said. "Some California wine is getting in. I've seen a few bottles with Wente Vineyards, Mondavi and other labels."

Export rules, while complicated, allow pharmaceutical and agricultural products – including wine – to enter Cuba from the U.S. However, there is almost no significant presence of U.S. wine in Cuba, leaving the market nearly untapped.

Cuba's government-operated Empresa Comercializadora de Alimentos (ALIMPORT) until recently served as the sole purchasing entity for U.S. licensed agricultural products coming into Cuba. Today, ALIMPORT is no longer the sole buyer of U.S. ag or retail products. Other companies are now engaged in distribution of canned items as well as alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages destined for the hospitality and restaurant industries.

California wineries can also sell through international distributors, such as Joan Sarda, with ties to Cuban buyers. That company holds purchasing contracts for wines



from Europe and elsewhere and is capable of immediately buying direct from California wineries and placing them in various markets, such as Cuba, Panama, Uruguay, Costa Rica or the Dominican Republic, according to the Cuban sommeliers.

“The emerging private sector in Cuba includes upper-class citizens who make money and want better wine,” Ms. Fraumeni said. “I’ve seen wine that sells for \$3 a bottle in the U.S. going for \$25 to \$30 in Cuba. They may drink mojitos and other beverages during the day, but at dinner, it has to be good wine, and the price point has to be right.”

The visitors from Cuba were led by Fernando Fernandez, sommelier professor, Habano S.A., Habana Club International adviser and Wine and Spirit Education Trust professor. He has a third-level certification from London-based WSET, the foremost international wine and spirits education body.

He and other sommeliers would like to see purchase agreements in place so that California wines can arrive in the Cuban marketplace as early as this October.

“There are more than 250 sommeliers in Cuba, and half of them are women,” Mr. Fernandez said, “This is a great opportunity for us to get to know, understand and appreciate California wines so we can be in a position to both recommend and help promote them in our country. We want to thank all those who put this summit together. It was a wonderful experience.”

Special thanks also went out to Rep. Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, for helping to expedite the visa-interview process for the group through the State Department.

Linsey Gallagher, Wine Institute vice president for international marketing, presented an overview of the state’s wine industry and its 3,800 wineries and 4,600 wine-grape growers. She said 570,000 acres are planted with wine grapes in the state that

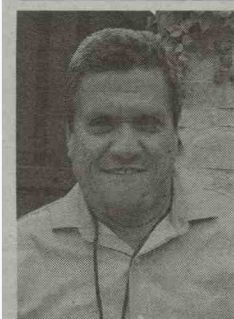
produced 215 million cases of wine in 2013. The value of U.S. wine exports (48.4 million cases) last year totaled \$1.55 billion – making the U.S. the fourth largest global producer following France, Italy and Spain.

Other host wineries and associations participating in the Cuban Sommelier Summit include Saintsbury, Scribe, Sebastiani, Gloria Ferrer, Benziger, Seghesio, E&J Gallo brand MacMurray Ranch, Silver Oak, Constellation Brands’ Franciscan, Trinchero Family Estates, Silverado Partners’ Garnet, Wing & Barrel Ranch, Kornell, Parallel, Rarecat and Korbel Brandy.

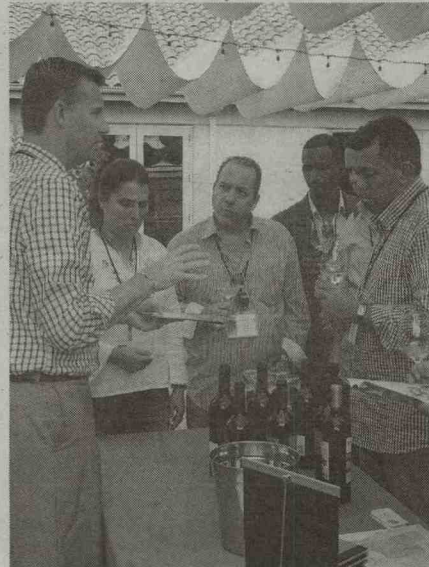
Resources: U.S. Commerce Department Export Administration Regulations ([www.bis.doc.gov/index.php/policy-guidance/country-guidance/sanctioned-destinations/Cuba](http://www.bis.doc.gov/index.php/policy-guidance/country-guidance/sanctioned-destinations/Cuba)) and Department of the Treasury Office of Foreign Asset Control (202-482-4252)



(credit: Gary Quackenbush)  
 Twenty sommeliers from Cuba enjoy breakfast at Ramekins Culinary Center in Sonoma.



(credit: Gary Quackenbush)  
**Fernando Fernandez,**  
tour leader and  
sommelier professor  
from Cuba



(credit: Gary Quackenbush)  
Cuban sommeliers sample wines from the  
Santa Barbara Vintners, Paso Robles Wine  
Country and Wines of Lodi at a walk-around  
tasting at Ramekins Culinary Center in  
Sonoma.



(credit: Gary Quackenbush)  
**Holly Fraumeni,**  
executive director of  
Californians Building  
Bridges



(credit: Gary Quackenbush)  
**Linsey Gallagher,** Wine  
Institute vice president  
for international  
marketing