

Utah Approves Winery in Town With Polygamous Sect

LINDSAY WHITEHURST, Associated Press



FILE - In this April 20, 2006, file photo, Hildale, Utah, sits at the base of Red Rock Cliff mountains with its sister city, Colorado City, Ariz., in the foreground. Utah's liquor commission has approved a winemaking license for a new winery in the town of Hildale, home to a polygamous sect. (AP Photo/Douglas C. Pizac, File)

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — A town on the Utah-Arizona border largely controlled by Warren Jeffs' polygamous sect moved closer to opening its first commercial winery, a new venture and a signal of yet another lifestyle choice that separates the sect from mainstream Mormon teachings.

State liquor authorities say the owners of Vintage Reserve Estates plan to make red and rosé wines with grapes purchased out of state and sell it through Utah's state-owned liquor stores.

Abe Kader, a state inspector, said three of the five owners are from Hildale, Utah, and Colorado City, Arizona. The twin border towns are populated largely by members of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, a radical offshoot of mainstream Mormonism whose members believe polygamy brings exaltation in heaven. The mainstream church strictly prohibits the practice.

The winery owners didn't return phone calls Wednesday. An employee for a state-controlled trust that holds most of the land in the area, Isaac Wyler, said the registered Hildale address for the company appears to be on property controlled by the sect.

Members of the mainstream Mormon church generally eschew alcohol and caffeinated beverages like coffee and tea. Polygamists, on the other hand, often drink alcohol and coffee.

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Historian Ken Driggs said the roots of the sect go back to the 1920s, when a church president began cracking down on both alcohol use and polygamy. Many people in plural marriages were excommunicated and kept both their polygamous lifestyle and more lax attitudes toward alcohol, coffee and tea.

In past years, people in the Jeffs-led group would occasionally drink beer, former member Lorin Holm said. But in the face of new edicts from their imprisoned leader, drinking alcohol has become more frowned upon, he said.

"He just started clamping down on everybody," Holm said of Jeffs, who is serving a life sentence in Texas for sexually assaulting underage girls he considered wives but maintains control of the group through communications from prison.

Driggs, who has been studying the sect and traveling to the area for decades, said winemaking is a new venture.

"There's never been anything like it," he said. "The industries are mostly construction, cabinet-making, any of those kind of things."

Owners didn't attend a state liquor commission meeting where their license was approved Tuesday, putting Vintage Reserve Estates on the path to becoming the 13th winery in Utah.

"It's one of the biggest, cleanest, best-equipped wineries I've seen," said Kader, the state inspector.

He said that the owners plan to apply in the future for a package license to sell the wine on the Hildale property.

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