Economy not stopping wineries from opening in Fair Play

By Mike Dunne, Sacramento Bee

California's wine trade hasn't been immune from the nation's lingering recession – witness the deep discounts on high-end wines – but sales nevertheless have remained surprisingly strong.

What's more, people still see enough hope in the industry to continue to open wineries.

Just take a drive into the Sierra foothills east of Sacramento. Around any bend, you are apt to be startled by the flapping and snapping of bright banners heralding the debut of another winery.

So it was earlier this spring as we wound our way through southwestern El Dorado County. As we approached Fair Play, a newly paved drive and a sign with a winery name we didn't recognize caught our eye.

We moseyed up the hill, past a handsome new steel-and-stone winery and on to its neighboring tasting room. The arrangement reminded me of one of the Mother Lode's old gold mines, with a large stamp mill looming over the site and a tiny assay office off to one side.

The pay dirt being exploited here, however, is rows of vines rather than veins of quartz, though a seam of Gold Rush history runs through the property.

The sign high on the winery says "Skinner Native Wine & Brandy." This is a slight alteration of the sign "J. Skinner Native Wine & Brandy" that hung on the winery of one James Skinner in western El Dorado County starting in the 1860s.

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