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Cheers to new Vermont spirits law

*By Lisa Rathke
The Associated Press*

SHELBURNE -- Winemakers Ken and Gail Albert couldn't sell glasses of their Shelburne Vineyard wine at parties in their tasting room. They could only offer tastings or get caterers to sell the wine to customers upstairs.

A bill signed into law by the governor on Tuesday allows wineries and distilleries to sell their products on site.

Wineries, which already were permitted to offer tastings and sell bottles, can now sell glasses of wine, too. Distilleries, which could do neither, can now offer tastings and sell bottles.

The new law also lets wineries sell and offer tastings of other manufacturers' wines, rent their sites for events such as weddings, and produce and sell fortified wines such as ports.

Supporters hope the change will give a boost to local agriculture and tourism at a time when the economy needs it.

"I think the industry itself has the capacity to be able to become a destination along with other attractions in Vermont," Gail Albert said. "When tourists come to a winery like this, they come and they have their events, they have weddings and other activities, and they bring with them family and friends, and all those people spill over into the rest of the economy."

Since the first winery was created in Jacksonville nearly 25 years ago, Vermont's wine industry has grown to 20 wineries generating \$5 million a year, Gov. Jim Douglas said.

"These changes will bring wineries, distilleries in line with the regulations that we have in place for breweries now," he said.

Ed Metcalfe of Whitingham was on the fence about opening a distillery in Vermont if he couldn't sell his vodka and specialty liquors on site. But he said the new law cinched it for him, allowing him to sell and offer tastings at the distillery he plans in Marlboro.

"When you give them a tour and give them a taste," he said, "people are more apt to buy."

Forty-three states currently allow some form of spirits tasting, said Ben Jenkins, a spokesman for the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, a trade association representing producers and marketers. Efforts are under way in several states to pass tastings legislation, he said.

"States across the country are modernizing their liquor laws in order to give consumers more convenience, businesses more choices of how they can better serve their consumers and the state some much-needed revenue," he said.

Currently, all 50 states have wineries. All allow tastings, but only about 40 allow sales by the glass, said Bill Nelson, of WineAmerica, an association of American wineries.

"This has taken a while for everybody to move along with," he said. "It has not been a given in a lot of states."
