During Prohibition, the U.S. Treasury Department’s new enforcement agents scoured the country for speakeasies and bootleggers, and agents busted more than 500,000 people when booze was banned from 1920 to 1933.

“Prohibition was quick and brutal. It destroyed all the winemaking capability in this country,” said Stephen Menke, Colorado State University associate professor of enology, or winemaking, who teaches a winemaking history class. “Wineries had 72 hours to demolish their equipment. Otherwise, agents took sledgehammers to the tanks.”

Colorado suffered the same setbacks as the rest of the country. Mature vineyards were ripped out and other crops planted in their place.

“Prohibition robbed the young wine industry in our state of several decades of accumulated experience in grape and wine production,” Menke said. “We’re still recovering and learning. It takes time to document and put into practice what you’ve learned.”

In 1990, the College of Agricultural Sciences began helping the state wine industry rebound when the school started its trademark research program in viticulture and enology. The program is part of the College’s Department of Horticulture.

Colorado State University’s Orchard Mesa research site near Grand Junction is home base for its grape-growing and winemaking program, which involves research, teaching and close consultation with the state’s wine industry. The Grand Valley offers favorable growing conditions for wine grapes.

Stephen Menke, associate professor of enology, experiments with varietals and blends that appeal to consumers and take advantage of grapes that can be successfully grown in Colorado.
and Landscape Architecture and is centered at CSU’s Western Colorado Research Center, at the Orchard Mesa site near Grand Junction. Here, CSU researchers search for and test grape varieties likely to perform best in the Grand Valley, the Western Slope hub of Colorado’s budding wine industry. Researchers — chiefly Menke — then use promising varieties to form blends that appeal to wine drinkers.

The researchers consult closely with growers and wineries to find grape varieties and winemaking approaches to propel Colorado wine. Indeed, the program’s leaders have earned central consulting roles in the Colorado wine industry: Horst Caspari, CSU professor of viticulture, is the state viticulturalist in Colorado; Menke is the state enologist.

“The viticulture and enology program is a good one for us in what is classically the land-grant mission,” said Stephen Wallner, head of the Department of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture. “That’s because we work so closely with the wine producers to help them do a better job and to be part of a profitable industry.”

In addition, the department offers a concentration in viticulture and enology to students majoring in horticulture. The Colorado Wine Industry Development Board and the Colorado Association for Viticulture and Enology fund a portion of faculty salaries, and CSU educates students who want to become professionals in the field, Wallner explained. The Colorado Mountain Winefest, a showcase of jazz, arts and winemaking held each September in Palisade, also benefits the CSU program.

CSU’s viticulture and enology program hopes to add another research component by establishing a winery, with the working name of Ram’s Point Winery. College administrators first must gain federal and university approvals, as well as licensing from state officials, to move ahead with the venture; planning and the approval process are under way. Such a winery could help facilitate research, funding and internship opportunities.

Coleman Cornelius contributed to this report.