

Follow the lure of the grape to southwest Michigan

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by Mike Michaelson, September 10, 2004

Viticulture is a highly subjective and individual craft. No two wineries - or wines - are identical. And that makes exploring wine country fun.

This is true in southwest Michigan, where a meandering (but well-sign-posted) wine trail offers a dozen stops at wineries, tasting rooms and vineyards. Many are small family operations; others do business on a somewhat larger scale. Some are shoestring, others are well-financed (emphasizing the truism that the way to make a small fortune with a winery is to start with a large fortune). Most seem to enjoy the camaraderie that comes from sharing a passion - a rapport that extends to joining together to stage three regionwide annual events.

Domaine Berrien Cellars, for ex-ample, is run by relative newcomer Wally Maurer. In 2001 he opened the winery that is good-naturedly known by other local vintners as "Wally World." Maurer is "good neighbors" with the Lemon family, which has operated its fruit farm for 150 years. Nearby is Rick Moersch, who opened Heart of the Vineyard (now known as Round Barn Winery & Distillery) in 1992, having served as winemaker for 14 years at Tabor Hill, now his next-door neighbor.

These winemakers are attracted to a region with slightly acidic, sandy soil and a climate moderated by nearby Lake Michigan that is ideal for cultivating grapes. This small corner of the state is a designated American viticultural area classified as "Lake Michigan Shore." Where the glaciers stopped, fruit grows. The rolling landscape is rich with orchards and vineyards that contain more than 10,000 acres of grapes.

Despite its newness, Domaine Berrien Cellars already has collected awards for its estate-grown dry red wines, which include Merlot and Syrah. A new release is a Cabernet Franc ice wine, for which grapes were left on the vine for several months after harvest time, eventually to freeze and be picked and crushed while below 17 degrees.

The family-run winery occupies an old cherry farm and enjoys one of the highest elevations in Berrien County, where prevailing breezes from Lake Michigan make it relatively frost free. It welcomes visitors to a smart tasting room featuring light oak and slate floors. A wooden deck is perfect for picnics and will provide a setting for Harvest Moon Steak Fry (Sept. 25), featuring grilled steaks and live guitar music.

"I pour everyone's wine so visitors get to talk to the winemaker," says Maurer. "I also encourage them to stop at other wineries along the trail, because we're all unique."

Neighboring Lemon Creek Winery, which has been making wine for 20 years on its family farm, is Michigan's largest grower of wine grapes, devoting about half of its 300 acres to them. It produces up to 6,000 cases a year, a range of whites, reds and sparkling wines. Selections include Pinot Grigio, Chardonnay, Riesling, Gewurztraminer and Cabernet Sauvignon. Also offered are two ice wines, Vidal and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Lemon Creek also is the spot for picked and U-pick fruit. Pears are available in September, red raspberries through October and apples into November.

For something completely different - to please eye and palate - visit Round Barn Winery. It not only makes award-winning wines that include Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, dry Riesling, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, but also micro-brews beer and creates French-style eudevies in a gleaming distillery. The latter is housed in a distinctive 1911 Amish round barn that is popular for wedding receptions and other events.

"The Amish built barns round so they would have no corners where bad spirits might hide," says Chris Moersch, son of the founder. The barn was discovered in northern Indiana, dismantled, transported 90 miles to the winery and rebuilt by Amish craftsmen. The winery also offers classes in wine-making and distillation and has a two-room bed-and-breakfast.

Karma Vista Vineyards is one of the region's newest wineries and is operated by one of Michigan's old-est farm families. It perches on a hillside that offers a distant view of sand dunes that flank Lake Michigan, six miles northwest. Buzzards circling the rolling vineyards are welcome guests.

"They keep the flocks of birds away from the grapes," says Joe Herman, whose family has been farming there for 157 years. "Our focus is in the vineyard," says Herman. "If you do a great job with the fruit, there is little wine-making you have to do." At Karma Vista's handsome tasting room, wine evaluation sheets not only contain descriptions of wine, but have a handy comparative sugar chart where wines range from a bone-dry blend and extremely dry Cabernet Franc to a 100 percent sweet wine made from Montmorency cherries.

Special two-day events along the wine trail focus on pairing wine and food and provide entertainment. Karma Vista, for example, offers Spanish-style Manchego cheese and brie from a local cheese maker as well as shrimps with cocktail sauce and bruschetta. Domaine Berrien Cellars offers smoked salmon, sau-sages and cheese.

Tickets cost \$25, with sales limited to 400 tickets for each weekend (it is advisable to order tickets as far in advance as possible). In addition to Holiday Spice in November, there is a Valentine's Day event and another to welcome summer.

Perhaps the best-known winery within the Lake Michigan shore appellation is Tabor Hill, where a huge trophy case is crammed with medals, ribbons and testimonials. Its Chardonnay has been served at the White House and its Grand Mark sparkling wine is a consistent award winner. Take a tour of the newly expanded winery and you'll hear that it takes 3 pounds of grapes to make a bottle of wine and that Tabor Hill produces 36,000 cases a year.

Tabor Hill's kitchen earns many plaudits and its restaurant (also recently expanded, with a piano lounge added) is a don't-miss romantic dining spot along the wine trail. Picture windows look out onto vineyards, with the dark brooding humps of the dune ridges along Lake Michigan on the horizon. Starters include crab cakes and duck and pork pâté. Signature entrées are raspberry chicken and wild Alaskan king salmon fillet wrapped in grape leaves.