



COURTESY CHRIS PASTOTNIK



COURTESY AVONLEA VINEYARDS



COURTESY FENN VALLEY VINEYARDS

Fruit of the Vine

By Julie Bonner Stevenson

Ah, life in western Michigan: the beaches, the sunsets, the lakeshore tourist towns filled with great boutiques and ice cream shops. And it turns out Lake Michigan is responsible for one more wonderful aspect of life in Michigan: It creates an idyllic climate for producing exceptional wines.

“Most of the grapes grown in Michigan are grown within 25 miles of Lake Michigan,” said Molli Young, wine taster for Fenn Valley Vineyard in Fennville in the southwestern part of the state. “Because of (the lake), it’s warmer in the winter. That whole body of water is warmer than the air,” she explained.

Michigan wines are often compared to those produced in Germany, a fact Young attributes to Michigan and Germany being at the same latitude. Some wines derive desired flavor from oak casks; when that additional essence isn’t desired, stainless steel barrels are used. A longer fermentation process allows for more of the sugar in the wine to be reduced by the yeast used in fermenting, producing a dryer wine. A shorter fermentation process allows for more residual sugar creating a semi-dry wine.

Vineyard management is, according to Young, a year-round process. “We have about 60 acres of grapes,” said Young. “They’re out there in winter pruning. They start bottling in March or April.”

Fenn Valley Vineyards is owned by Doug Welsch, who started the business with his parents in 1973 when he was newly out of college. The vineyard now produces about 40 different wines, including ice wine, which sells for \$44 per half bottle. Young attributes the cost of ice wine to the high cost of its production.

“ You let the grapes freeze in the vineyard, harvest and process them frozen. You don’t get much product when you get the grapes frozen; you might get a couple of drops from each grape. It’s very expensive to produce,” explained Young. The end result: “It’s a very rich, thick, dessert wine. That’s the only one we charge to taste.”

Fenn Valley is best known for its Rieslings. Its most popular is the 2003 Riesling, which retails at \$12 per bottle, while Harmony Classic White, another popular favorite, costs about \$8. Wines may be tasted and purchased at the winery. Bottles of select Fenn Valley wines are sold at D&W stores, as well.

Among the other wines produced near the southwestern shores of Lake Michigan are those from Round Barn Winery in Baroda. In 1996, the Moersch family purchased a Rochester, Ind., round barn built in 1911. Amish workers tore down the barn, moved it across the Michigan border and re-built it on the Moersch family’s property. A round barn is a curious thing to most but, according to Moersch, they are prevalent in Indiana. One reason turn-of-the-century farmers built them is the saying that in a round building there are no corners in which bad spirits can hide. Noting the double entendre of “spirits” in regard to distilled beverages, the Moersch family had acquired a conversation piece and a new brand identity.

“ We were formerly known as Heart of the Vineyard; we spent 12 years as that name,” said Moersch. “But we put that huge barn on our property and people would mention ‘the round barn.’”

Round Barn Winery, located near Tabor Hill Winery & Restaurant, has 12 of its 30 acres planted with grapes. A relatively new winery, it has been operating since August 1992, when Rick Moersch, Chris’ father, left Tabor Hill winery, where he had worked for 13 years.

“ We make about 30 different (wines),” said Moersch, adding, “Obviously, I’m biased, but I think we have as good a selection of wines as you can find in the Midwest. We have a distillery as well — we produce brandy.” Among the wines to be found at Round Barn are Riesling, Pinot Gris and Chardonnay. The most expensive bottle is a 2002 Merlot, which sells for \$34, while lower-priced selections include a series of wines such as a demi-sec, semi-dry white and semi-dry red that retail for \$8.49 each.

About 90 percent of the wine is sold at the winery, although several restaurants in Illinois, Indiana and Michigan pour Round Barn wines, which are also stocked at larger fine wine shops. Award-winning wines produced by Round Barn Winery include the dessert wine Black Currant Pi, a gold medal winner at the 2004 Indy International Wine Competition, and 2003 Dry Muscat Ottonel and Edel Doux, gold medal winners at the Michigan State Fair 2004 Wine Competition.

Speaking of award-winning wines, Round Barn’s neighbor, Tabor Hill Winery & Restaurant, has a list to make the most discriminating wine connoisseur take notice. In June 2004, its Lake Michigan Shore 2003 Riesling took home a gold medal from the San Francisco Wine Competition, while five more Tabor Hill wines brought silver medals and four others earned bronze. Throughout 2004, as with previous years, the awards have been consistent, earned in competitions from Dallas (Dallas Morning News Wine Competition) to Michigan’s own Great Lake Wine Competition.

Tabor Hill began on 12 acres in 1968. Founded by the Upton family, the vineyard now expands across 47 acres where grapes for wines such as Chardonnay, Riesling and Merlot are grown and

harvested. Tabor Hill's first wine, Classic Demi-Sec, is its best-selling wine, accounting for 60 percent of annual sales. "It won a gold medal from Tasters Guild," said Thai Kapoor, marketing manager. Kapoor, whose wine expertise comes from Napa Valley, the mecca for American winemaking, says his personal favorite is the Lake Michigan Shore Merlot. Tabor Hill wines may be purchased at any of the three Tabor Hill stores, located in Bridgman, Saugatuck and Ann Arbor. Meijer stores also carry some of the wines.

One of the newer southwestern Michigan wineries, Karma Vista Vineyards, gets a vote for best concept and label (and yes, the wines are great, too). The winery opened in the spring of 2002, when Joe and Sue Herman decided to establish a winery after years of fruit farming. "I'm sixth generation," said Joe Herman, who lives on his family's 400-acre farm in Coloma. Karma Vista Vineyards produces wines from grapes grown on 45 acres devoted to wine grapes (grapes for juice are also grown on the property).

A self-professed frustrated marketing wannabe, Herman found the ideal outlet for his creativity with his wines. The concept behind many of the wine names is attributed to several rock 'n' roll songs. Among them is Pink Side of the Moon, inspired by Pink Floyd's "Dark Side of the Moon" album. The label bears the illustration of a light spectrum piercing a half moon. Another interesting label design found on a Karma Vista Chardonnay is done in a yin-yang motif. Herman's personal favorite wine is his merlot, a touchy little grape that tends to be a little thin-skinned about the Michigan climate. "We're known for our merlot," he said, but added, "Our most popular is our Riesling, Starry, Starry White."

The extent of Herman's interest in marketing begins and ends with Karma Vista's kooky names and labels. When it comes to marketing the product in stores, he says no.

"We have no desire to be in stores. We're just going to sell out of the winery; we're gonna stay relatively small and exclusive," he said. He has relented to allow one store in St. Joseph to stock them.

The Herman's wines, complete with colorful labels and check-it-out names, are great conversation starters, and why not? "The best thing served with wine is conversation," said Joe. GR

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Southwestern Michigan Vineyards

Contessa Wine Cellars, Coloma. www.contessawinecellars.com, (269) 468-5534

Domaine Berrien Cellars, Berrien Springs. www.domaineberrien.com, (269) 473-9463

Fenn Valley Vineyards, Fennville. www.fennvalley.com, (269) 561-2396

Karma Vista Vineyards, Coloma. www.karmavista.com, (269) 468-9463

Lemon Creek Winery, Berrien Springs. www.lemoncreekwinery.com, (269) 471-1321

Round Barn Winery, Baroda. www.heartofthevineyard.com, (800) 716-9463

St. Julian Wine Co., Paw Paw. www.stjulian.com, (800) 732-6002

Tabor Hill Winery and Restaurant, Buchanan. www.taborhill.com, (800) 283-3363

Warner Vineyards, Paw Paw. warnerwines.com, (800) 756-5357