

The Wines of Michigan

Written by Terry Connor
Wednesday, 23 May 2012 07:38

My first experience with Michigan was in the airport at Detroit. I thank Providence that my first impression was a fleeting one. My personal dislike for airports is a story for another day, and it does not belong in a wine column; especially the part with four-letter words. The airport was soon out of my system when I got into the countryside and Franco and I headed towards Traverse City.

Franco has been studying. He tells me that the Michigan wine industry really got off to a start after prohibition was repealed in 1933. The traditional wines of Michigan were sweet wines, often made from grape varieties native to North America, such as Catawba, Concord and Niagara. Wine was also produced from hybrid grapes partly developed by crossing native species with Vinifera grapes from Europe. North American native grapes have the advantage of being adapted to local growing conditions; thus a high fruit yield. (Speaking of Concord Grapes; Michigan was well poised to enter into the wine industry. The state already had huge plantings of grapes for a company with a name familiar to us all; that being The Welch Grape Juice Company. Remember when we were kids and we would drink Welch's Grape Juice and get a purple mustache?)

The wineries of Michigan specialized in sweet wine well into the 1970's. With demand growing rapidly for local fine wines, some of the makers of sweet wines experimented by breaking away from the traditional and instead produced wines from vinifera. Tabor Hill Winery opened in 1971 as the first, and then in 1974, Chateau Grand Traverse opened in the Traverse Bay Region of Northern Michigan.

Michigan now has four recognized American Viticultural Areas. (AVA's) They are Fennville, Lake Michigan Shore, Leelanau Peninsula, and Old Mission Peninsula. All four regions are located in proximity to Lake Michigan and almost all of the grapes are grown within 25 miles of the Lake. The Lake effect provides a favorable microclimate for the fruit. The two Northern AVA's average a 145 day growing season, while the two Southern AVA's yield a 160 day growing season. The grapes produced in the four AVAs include the European Vinifera Cabernet Franc, Chardonnay, Gewurztraminer, Pinot Noir, Merlot, Syrah, Pinot Gris, and Riesling. The American varieties include Catawba, Niagara, and huge quantities of Concord.

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The wines of Michigan are many and varied. At last count there were 87 wineries in operation. The wineries produce varietals from grapes, pitted fruits and Ice Wine. (Ice Wine is another name for dessert wine.) We know what the grape wines are, but how about the fruit wines. Michigan is probably the leader in diverse varieties of bottled fruit wines. Fruit wine has a long and diverse history in Europe, especially in the Baltic States and in Poland, where grapes do not easily grow. In Michigan, apple and cherry wine are produced in high volumes and with many different blends. Michigan is also a leader in the production of Fruit Brandy.

Going back to the Traverse City area, we find that the climate in that area allows for the production of Ice Wine; however Ice Wine requires an early hard freeze so that the fruit, still on the vine, can be harvested while frozen. A small number of wineries produce this style; however the conditions must be perfect. Some years are terrific; some are terrible. It is better left to the professionals. Ice Wine is labor intensive, and even if the harvest is perfect, the ice wine will be pricey. Since I love spending your money, I recommend you try one bottle. It will cost around \$40 and it is sure to enhance your dessert.

Discussing the Ice Wines, stone fruit wines, and brandies is important, because it highlights the diversity that winemakers of this area possess in addition to grape varietals. However, the grape varietals are at the heart of our discussion. Chardonnay, Riesling, Pinot Gris, Cabernet Franc, Pinot Noir, and Merlot are the core grapes that are used for blending or single grape bottling. The wineries that produce wines made from these grapes are numerous and so I recommend that, if you either live in, or are visiting, Michigan, you go to the internet and find the "WINE TRAILS" that will guide you to the various tasting rooms. This is the best way to maximize your time and to enjoy the wine tasting experience. You will find Chardonnay, Chardonnay Reserves, excellent Riesling influenced by the growth and maturing in the cool environment, single vineyard Merlot and Pinot Noir, and best of all you will be able to sample some very bold and creative blending by the very talented winemakers. How about a semi-sweet Riesling or a Meritage blended with Cabernet Franc, Syrah and Merlot.

Cheers!

(Next stop is somewhere in Germany.)

WINESPEAK

I have now covered five states in addition to the three west coast states. The pattern is starting to repeat itself in that there are several common areas that each winery shares. Allow me to list some of them and you will see what I mean.

- The winery owners are dedicated and passionate about wine as are the winemakers. They are meticulous about how their wine is presented, be it the packaging, the tasting room, and the surrounding grounds.
- Sustainability is a top priority.
- There is a willingness to share information. This could be with a group on tour or to share ideas with other wineries.
- There is an ever increasing bond with academia for research and education.
- There are strong relations between the wineries and the professional growers association for each state. I was witness to this in Maryland and Virginia.
- And finally, it is abundantly clear that wine sales produce big bucks tax revenues.

All this is in addition to the daily routine of making wine. I think the wineries have a full plate.

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