

# The people, passion behind Michigan wines

By Tony Lascari [tlascari@mdn.net](mailto:tlascari@mdn.net)

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A good wine isn't just about white or red, sweet or dry. It's about the people who make it.

That's why Coleman resident Rick Sigsby wrote "Michigan's Holy Water: The Great Lakes Wine Bible."

"A lot of these people just started as hobby wine makers and it turned into a nice business for them," Sigsby said in a recent interview. "From that you go to fruit farmers who have been in Michigan for generations ... to people who literally can't spend the interest on their checking accounts and always wanted to own a winery and cross it off their bucket list."

During the last two years Sigsby connected with owners, growers and winemakers. His book offers interviews with these industry insiders across the state, who help shed light on Michigan's vineyards.

"There's a huge, diverse group of people out there," Sigsby said. "Every one of them has a good story to tell. You have a glass of wine and they're all very happy to tell their story."

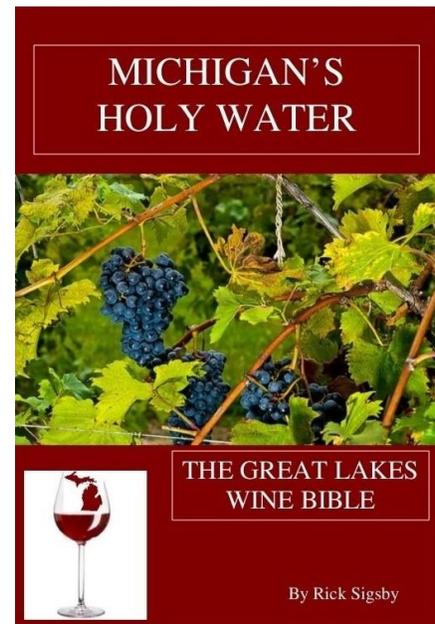
Some people may have preconceptions of what a Michigan-made wine will taste like.

"The biggest misconception about Michigan wines is that they're still based around Niagara and Concord grapes, the syrupy, fruity wine we knew in the '60s and '70s," Sigsby said. "The wine industry in Michigan has really taken a complete 180. There are still fantastic sweet wines out there, but there are also wonderful semi-sweet and dry wines."

Growers say people shouldn't compare Michigan wines to California wines because they have a different climate and grapes, Sigsby said. He said growers would prefer comparisons to wines made in Europe or Washington that are grown at a similar latitude.

Sigsby said Michigan's Riesling wines can compete against any Riesling in the world.

"The wine industry in Michigan is still very, very young," Sigsby said. "When you think of Michigan Riesling wines going out and competing in competitions against German wines that have been around for centuries, we're doing very, very well."



There also are some great red wines produced in the state, but there is still work to do with them, Sigsby said.

The book shows that Michigan wine producers have something to brag about, and it's getting better all the time, Sigsby said.

"We're making some fantastic wines," he said. "We have fantastic wine makers here who are recognized all over the world for being high quality wine makers."

Sigsby says he didn't set out to write a comprehensive guide on wines.

"I love to drink wine, but in all honesty, I'm as far away from a wine expert as you can get," he said.

He does belong to the Bay City Wine Club, which invites members to bring a bottle and hors d'oeuvres to pass each month. It was at one of those gatherings that someone mentioned that Michigan wines were not well represented in the club. No one came up with a good reason for why that was the case. Sigsby dug in, learning about the industry.

"The thing that I quickly discovered is Michigan is not winning just these local tasting contests, they're winning these international tasting competitions," he said. "There was a lot to write about."

The intent of the book was not to create wine experts, but instead create wine enthusiasts, Sigsby said. His hope is that people will toss the book in their glove compartment and look for wineries as they travel the state.

"People traditionally look for the Traverse City area or Southwest Michigan as the wine regions," he said. "The reality is there are wineries in the four corners of Michigan, including the Upper Peninsula. They're making a variety of wines, and really good wines."

There is some debate over what exactly makes a Michigan winery, from those who do 100 percent of the growing, bottling and marketing themselves, to people who just have a storefront with a fancy tasting room, Sigsby said.

"I can understand the frustration of the people who really put their heart and soul into the land," he said. "One of the things people don't understand is how labor intensive it is and how tough it is to make a quality wine. It's a lot of hard work. It's also money intensive."

Many small producers sell out of wine tasting rooms alone, because marketing is expensive, Sigsby said. The bigger wineries that can market regionally do well with it.

One thing that is clear is that people in the industry are happy to see the wine industry growing in Michigan.

"The really nice thing that I have discovered is they love to tell their story, but they have no qualms about praising other wineries and promoting others, because they have the attitude that we're all

in this together and if people are trying Michigan wines, they'll eventually get around to my wine," he said.

Gar Winslow, owner of Eastman Party Store, said Sigsby's book explores topics people might not know about.

"I think that the project was a good project in the sense that a lot of people don't know the history of the families in the industry," he said.

The emphasis on the expansion of Michigan's wines beyond sweet wines also is important, Winslow said.

"Hopefully some people will pick the book up and read it," he said. "There are some good stories."

Sigsby said every community has a person who knows his or her wines well, and they can help others find the good ones. As one of Midland's best known wine experts, Winslow himself deserved a mention in the book, Sigsby said.

"Gar certainly is one who's more than willing to help people out with wines and wine pairings," Sigsby said.

"Michigan's Holy Water: The Great Lakes Wine Bible" is available online at [www.rsigsby.com](http://www.rsigsby.com) or at Eastman Party Store, 5205 Eastman Ave., in Midland. Published by Dreambuilder Publications, the book costs \$17.95.