

MICHIGAN'S HOLY WATER



THE GREAT LAKES WINE BIBLE

By Rick Sigsby

PREFACE

Thomas Jefferson said, “Good wine is a necessity of life.” And truly, the best way to learn about wine is to drink it. Despite being literally ignored by the wine world, Michigan wineries have much to be proud of and the time is right to drink up and start the bragging.

In the last decade, while in the midst of a depressed economy, the Great Lakes wine industry has shown unprecedented growth and the number of acres dedicated to grapes have increased dramatically. Michigan is producing award-winning wines – not first place in the local wine club tasting contests but rather prestigious events across North America and internationally.

Historically, Michigan has been producing great wine “legally” since the mid-1800’s and shortly after Prohibition ended, the state was a national leader in the wine industry – for heaven’s sake, Cold Duck was invented right here in Michigan! Yet, the rest of the country has failed to take notice. Strohs was brewed in Michigan but it was Martin Luther who said, “Beer was made by men, wine by God.”

Thus, the idea for a book touting great tasting Michigan wines was born.

A quick literary search showed the last quality book on Michigan wineries (*From the Vine*) was published in 2007. Statistics from the Michigan Wine and Grape Industry Council show the number of wineries in our state has more than double since 2006, from 45 to 93 in 2012. When looking at written wine works on a regional and national basis, Michigan is barely a footnote.

The Wines of America (1990) dedicates five pages of a 530-page book to the Michigan wine industry. *The Modern Encyclopedia of Wine* (1991) has three paragraphs about Michigan in a 576-page book. *The Great Wines of America* (2005) mentions one Michigan winemaker. *The Wine Bible* (2001) doesn’t mention Michigan at all. To add a touch of insult, neither does *Wine for Dummies* or *The Idiots Guide to Wine*.

It is time Michigan had its own wine bible – Martin Luther may have been a bit bold in his statement but a multitude of palates would agree that Michigan has an abundance of blessed winemakers. In the Great Lakes state, from the Upper Peninsula to the Indiana/Ohio border, from the Lake Michigan shoreline to the Huron waters, Michigan wineries are making holy water in the form of great wine.

This book has an insider’s look at why every resident should have their wine racks filled with Michigan wine and every tourist should never pass a wine tasting room without stopping. From a \$5 to \$50 bottle, the price is right because the wine in Michigan tasted heavenly

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Wine Enthusiasts,

The Michigan wine industry has a rich and colorful history. It is one part nature, two parts determination with a little charm thrown in, to make it a celebration of life with great tasting wines.

My grandfather saw the potential for making quality wine here back in 1936, when he moved his Meconi Wine Company from Detroit to Paw Paw and it became the St. Julian Winery – the oldest and largest winery in Michigan. My father advanced the industry further by creating the first tasting room at our winery with the opening of I-94 in 1959. Today, tasting rooms are a permanent feature at virtually every winery in the state.

The first major wine producing area was actually in the downriver area of southeast Michigan but it soon moved to the western side, which now has the largest American Viticultural Area – the Lake Michigan Shore AVA - with over thirty wineries in primarily Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties. Traverse City's wine country began with pioneers like Bernie Rink (Boskydel Winery) on the Leelanau peninsula and Ed O'Keefe (Chateau Grand Traverse) on Old Mission peninsula. Now northwest Michigan has nearly fifty wineries.

There are over one hundred wineries sprinkled all over the state including the Upper Peninsula and weekend warriors hit the wine trails the year-round. Even as the vineyards go to sleep for the winter, wine lovers flood the tasting rooms in search of Michigan's latest great vintage.

But it's not just the wine they seek...it's the story behind the winery that also intrigues them.

Every vineyard and every winemaker has a story. It's a family owned farm with generations of experience or a young couple getting their hands dirty with a plot of land that now sprouts grapevines. It's an entrepreneur who has gone from making wine in the basement to scratching off another item from their "bucket list" by starting a winery.

Michigan has reason to brag about its wines. We have something for everyone – red, white, dry or sweet. The industry was built on the backs of Concord and Niagara grapes but now boasts world-class vinifera and fruit wines that will please the palates of nearly every wine drinker.

What better way to enjoy this book, than to get a bottle of Michigan wine and learn about our fascinating industry. Believe me when I say we have plenty of "characters" to talk about. Sip some of our "holy water" as you turn the pages, going from winery to winery around our state. It's a journey you will savor.

David Braganini, St. Julian Winery

THE HISTORY OF WINE

FIRST CAME THE GRAPE THEN CAME THE WINE

In the beginning, God created grapes, shortly after, man created wine.

The word wine and its various synonyms appear in the Bible over 200 times. Its first reference is in the book of Genesis. Noah's ark floats around for over a year and upon debarkation on Mt. Ararat, he becomes a farmer. And what does he plant?

Genesis 9:20 – 'Noah, a man of the soil, began the planting of vineyards.'

Then after harvesting the grapes...

Genesis 9:21 – 'He drank of the wine and became drunk...' Thus, Noah became the first vintner and wine drinker. And in his defense, he had no concept of a hangover. Also, for those that dismiss the health benefits, Noah lived another 350 years after drinking the wine and died at the ripe old age of 950 years old.

The history of wine is as elusive as the hints of essence in a fine Riesling or Cabernet. Every ancient civilization drank and worshipped wine in some form or another. Archaeologists have found evidence of grape wine dating back to 7,000 BC in Georgia, a former part of the U.S.S.R. (not the more familiar state of the original thirteen colonies). The earliest remnants of a winery date to 4,100 BC in Armenia.

The Greeks not only drank wine but they created Dionysus, the god of wine and revelry (a great combination). The Romans adopted this god and changed his name to Bacchus.

In medieval Europe, wine became the social drink of all the classes. One of the largest producers were the Benedictine monks, who had vineyards in Bordeaux, Burgundy and Champagne – Dom Perignon was a Benedictine monk.

Leif Erikson carried wine on his Viking vessel to seek new lands to the west. Ironically, one of the first things he and his men discovered upon landing on North American shores was a large cluster of wild grapes. Erikson promptly declared this vast wilderness Vinland, which is translated to Wineland for the non-Scandinavians. They immediately started making a vintage for the journey home.

Christopher Columbus also brought several European grape varieties to the New World. He stocked his three ships with barrels of wine and rationed it primarily to counteract the crew almost constantly whining – 'how much further?' and 'are we almost there?'

Other Old World grape varieties were brought in from the south by the Spanish conquistadors and Spanish missionaries were the first to establish a wine industry on the west coast.

MICHIGAN'S WINE HISTORY

The history of wine in Michigan also began with early explorers who found an abundance of wild grapes and fruit along the rivers and streams. A French missionary named Jacques Marquette established the first permanent settlement (1668) and it's assumed that wine was an important part of everyday life – he's a Frenchman after all. Antoine Cadillac established the first documented vineyard at Fort Pontchartrain (present day Detroit) in 1701.

As the French began expanding to the suburbs of the Fort, they discovered the downriver region to be laden with grapevines and called the nearby river La Riviere au Raisin or the Grape River- today the River Raisin in Monroe County. This undoubtedly prompted the establishment of the state's first commercial wineries. It was also the site of a major battle during the War of 1812 between British and American forces from which came one of the great rallying cries 'Remember the Raisin.' (I'm not making this up!)

In 1868, just thirty years after Michigan became the 24th state, Joseph Sterling opened the Pointe Aux Peaux Wine Company in Monroe. That same year, A.B. Jones started a vineyard in Paw Paw, which has remained a cornerstone in the wine industry still today.

By the 1880's, Monroe had over 1000 acres of grapevines. But within a few decades, grape rot and the temperance movement would doom the vineyards in the southeast Michigan area and the downriver area never recovered.

However, by then several wineries had opened in southwest Michigan. An American physician named Thomas Welch recognized the grape growing potential of the region. He opened a Welch's Grape Juice facility in Lawton (four miles from Paw Paw) in 1919 just prior to the 18th Amendment, ushering in the Prohibition Era.

Mariano Meconi moved his winemaking operation from Windsor to Detroit after Prohibition ended in 1933. He relocated to Paw Paw in 1936. One of the Meconi Wine Company's most successful labels was a sweet Concord wine called St. Julian, named in honor of his Italian hometown patron Saint San Guiliano. Shortly after Pearl Harbor was bombed, the company name was permanently changed to the St. Julian Wine Company, which grew to become Michigan's largest winery.

From 1933 to 1984, one of Michigan's significant wine producers was the Bronte Champagne and Wines Company in Detroit. Their primary contribution to the history of wine was the introduction of Cold Duck to the market in 1964, which quickly became their best seller. In fact, it's success caught the attention of Ernest Gallo in California and prompted him to create the Andre' brand, which is still on the retail shelves today.

Vineyards in northern Michigan got a toehold when a librarian named Bernie Rink began experimenting with French-American hybrid grapevines on the Leelanau peninsula in 1964. He opened the Boskedyl Winery tasting room in 1976. By then, another entrepreneur Ed O'Keefe had planted a vineyard on the

Old Mission peninsula in 1974 and became the first commercial wine operation in the north called Chateau Grand Traverse.

The Leelanau AVA (American Viticultural Area) was established in 1982 and the Old Mission AVA came along in 1987. Now the Traverse City area has over 30 wineries with labeled wines for sale.

The Fennville AVA was the first in the state and only the 3rd in the U.S. in 1981, with Fenn Valley Vineyards it's only commercial winery. The Lake Michigan Shore AVA covers over a million acres of southwest Michigan and has over two dozen wineries in Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties.

Now other wineries are springing up in various non-traditional fruit growing areas of the state. Southeast Michigan is making a comeback; the eastern or 'sunrise side' along Lake Huron is thriving and even the Upper Peninsula boasts several wineries and tasting rooms.

There are now over 120 licensed wineries in Michigan and 101 of them are members of the Michigan Grape and Wine Council, which means at least 51% of their wine is produced from Michigan grown fruits. The history of Michigan's wine industry is certainly colorful and definitely has a bright future.

THE MYTHS AND MYSTERIES OF WINE

Let your wine age – it will taste better.

Instead of looking at wine like scotch or whiskey, think of it as fresh fruit. Most wines are not meant to age. If you're buying wine in a store, it's already aged on the shelf. If you're buying it from a winery, ask them about the longevity of the wine. The value rarely goes up by storing it in your basement for years.

Red wines go with meat – white wines go with fish.

There are no hard and fast rules. Read the labels, consult the experts (take their advice), experiment, stick with what you like.

Looking at the color of wine will tell you how it tastes.

They tell you to look at the edge of the wine in the glass, for indicators as to the age of the wine and how it might taste. If it's cloudy it might not taste good...dah, ya think?! If it's clear, it's a young wine – if it's yellowish or brown tinted, it may have some age – pure wine swill! The way to determine the taste is to TASTE the wine.

Look for the 'tears of wine' or 'wine legs' - that will indicate more alcohol and a better wine.

No, it just means you'll get drunk faster. The alcohol level doesn't equate to quality.

Each style of wine needs it's own style of glassware.

This is a myth created by glassware companies. Pick a glass you like to go with reds and pick one that goes with whites. Save on cupboard space and dishwasher hands.

Open your wine a few hours before drinking to 'let it breathe.'

This is a good idea if your wine has developed a bad odor but that also indicates a more deep-seated problem. The difference in taste if you don't let it breathe isn't worth the time sitting around waiting. Go out and splurge on a \$10 wine aerator or if you think it's better to spend \$40 on one, go for it...or do like me, which is spend the money on a good wine and let it breathe in the glass.

Old wine eventually turns to vinegar.

If wine is stored properly it can still taste great after many years or vino caveat emptor (wine buyer beware). Even if a connoisseur stores it, a wine can just become old, uneventful or bland. As in people, some wines don't age well. The death knell for wine is being exposed to air – cork dries, cork shrinks, air rushes in, wine goes bad. It could turn to vinegar but more likely it just goes sour and DON'T cook with it.

Sniff the cork.

Poser! Just look to see if the cork is wet or moist. If so, there is a 99 out of 100 chance the wine is fine. After a few sips, you'll know if the wine is bad. Then go back and check the cork. An expert MIGHT tell by sniffing – leave it to them. Sniffing is a rookie play. Hint: a cork should smell like...cork.

Holding a glass by the stem and swirling your wine is snobbish.

Rule of thumb or in this case hand: Reds taste better at room temperature and whites should be chilled. Cupping the glass – body heat – you get the idea. For most people, swirling your wine is a mimicking habit but not a bad one. Maybe you're just contemplating or pondering a thought. Actually, the swirling does release aromas that should enhance the drinking experience. Just don't spill the reds on white tablecloths – the hostess will get pissed.

Every party store or winery has a wine expert.

Do you really think the kid stocking the shelves at Wal-Mart knows a good wine to go with your fabulous rib roast tonight? Most wineries do a great job of educating their tasting room staff, but not all. Most party stores don't have an expert but each town usually has a 'go to guy' (examples: Gar Winslow in Midland or Matt Rhodes in Okemos) – ask around, it's worth it to know who these people are.

After opening a bottle, you need to drink it all because wine starts going bad immediately.

This is a tricky one because of the drinking and driving laws. Finish the bottle because you want to, not because you feel you have to – if you're eating and drinking with friends, the second bottle could get you in trouble driving home. Finish 'em both off if you're not going anywhere. Some wines actually taste better the next day. Don't throw it out because you think it will taste bad later.

Twist or screw off caps are just for cheap wines.

This goes back to the days of Boone's Farm but let's hope you've graduated and moved on. Actually, some really high-end and even smaller 'boutique' wineries are using the twist or screw caps for closures. It eliminates the storage and cork taint issues and makes it much easier to re-close the bottle for 'I think I'll have some more wine later' (see above). Many wineries would jump on the bandwagon but it's also a more expensive type of closure.

You're getting a higher quality wine if it says Reserve or Estate on the label.

It could mean you're getting the wineries' very best or it could mean this bottle was the last of 100,000 cases sold overseas from last year's vintage. There is no industry consensus for the usage of the word 'reserve' and 'estate' could be the neighbor's backyard. It actually refers to the fruit being grown on land owned or controlled by the winery. Both terms *can* mean this is a very special wine – again, ask the experts first.

Dom Perignon invented champagne and said 'come quickly, I am drinking the stars.'

The earliest recordings of ‘sparkling wine’ were about 100 years before our famous monk was born (circa 1531). There is evidence that he had something to do with perfecting the mushroom cork and wire closure for champagne but the quote came from a 19th century ad campaign, about 200 years AFTER Dom was gone. There is no doubt that some of the very best champagne in the world carries his name.

The first United States commercial winery was in California.

Wrong. This is a hugely debated issue but only amongst old wineries. Obviously, the first winemakers in North America were the Scandinavians – they named their discovery Vinland after all. There were winemakers in Florida around 1563; Virginia in the early 1600’s and Pennsylvania by the mid-1600’s - of course, these weren’t states yet, just areas on old crude maps. Indiana claims the title for the first commercial winery in 1806. Missouri also claims the title. Ohio claims to be the home of the first ‘successful’ winery. Californian monks were making wine in the 1700’s but it was supposedly so bad they couldn’t sell it to anyone. Michigan’s first commercial winery was in Monroe in 1868.

European wines are better tasting than American wines.

Rent the movie *Bottle Shock*. It tells the true story about a blind wine tasting contest in France back in 1976. French judges placed an American red and an American white wine #1 – it shocked the wine world and of course, the French immediately tried to dismiss the results.

In Michigan, the wine experts usually come from MSU.

This is a tough call (cuz I’m a U of M grad). But the acknowledged expertise in growing fruit actually does come from Michigan State University. They have an excellent viticultural program. Lee Lutes, winemaker for Black Star Farms, hates the term ‘expert’ when it comes to wine but he did graduate from MSU – in FINANCE! Larry Mawby, one of the most knowledgeable people in sparkling wines, did graduate from MSU – in ENGLISH! Dr. Charles Edson, an MSU professor – in HORTICULTURE...okay, I give up.

All wine lovers are snobs.

See low, guttural tongue flapping Bronx cheer, ppthhfffftp...shame on you for thinking that.

CHATEAU CHANTAL WINE WITH A TOUCH OF DIVINE



Could it be possible for a winery to be inspired from sacramental wine? Indeed, it could.

In the case of Chateau Chantal, it's certainly possible considering the founders are a former priest and nun. Most wineries have an interesting background in regards to its origins but this is a wine tale of un-orthodox proportions.

Listeners usually stare with raised eyebrow when a tale starts with 'I know this is hard to believe but this one IS true.' Chateau Chantal's origins began in the Sacred Heart Seminary and convent of the Felician Sisters of Detroit. "It does make a great tale," said Marie Chantal Dalese, daughter of Robert and Nadine Begin, founders of the winery. "They had great careers in Catholic service, which made them fantastic hosts for what they do today and what they started on this hilltop on Old Mission Peninsula in 1993."

Robert was ordained in 1960 and served as a priest in various parishes throughout Detroit until 1972, when he made the decision to start his own construction company. Nadine entered the convent in 1950 and served the Catholic Church for 22 years before 'getting a fresh taste of life outside the walls.'

"My parents knew each other and worked together but there's no crazy Thornbirds chapter," laughed Marie. "For different reasons and at different times, they ended their church careers." Whether it was fate or divine intervention, their paths crossed again, a romance was kindled and they married in 1974.

So where did the inspiration to start a winery come from? "I've never discovered my father's original thoughts that inspired Chateau Chantal," Marie said. "But he does admit learning a lot about wine from his Monsignor, who happened to be from Bordeaux."

Marie came along in 1978 when her mother was 46 years old and her father took his entrepreneurial spirit to Old Mission Peninsula in 1980. His vision of building a European style winery chateau became clear while cross-country skiing on 'the hill' that also happened to be for sale. The Gore cherry farm became the Begin Orchards in 1983 and the planting of vines began in 1986.

Special permits were obtained from the Peninsula Township because no one had ever attempted a multi-purpose operation – a winery, a tasting room, a bed & breakfast, and private residence, all in one building. After its completion in 1993, the 3-room B & B started taking reservations, the Chateau served up their first vintage with Mark Johnson coming on as winemaker and the Begin family moved in – Marie was fifteen years old.



Interview with Marie-Chantal Begin Dalese:

There are investors and a Board of Directors but were your parents the ones who named the winery?

Marie: Yes and obviously there were a lot of discussions and decisions about the business around the house prior to moving into the chateau. It was Chateau Chantal this and Chateau Chantal that and Chateau Chantal shut up (laughing). At the time, I wasn't interested in wine at all, so it was tough on a teenager girl for a while. And my father was very emphatic about me trying the product. I was twenty-one before I could sample the family wines! (laughing)

How did your labels evolve?

Marie: The original label was a more European styled look – you know, with the picture of the chateau on display. Our reserve labels still have that look, although the building has changed over the years with several expansions. The non-reserve wines feature smaller detailed pictures of this place.

Two of your original wines are Naughty Red and Nice White. Are there religious overtones in those names?

Marie (chuckling): No, actually Mark was flipping through a magazine and saw a wine described as 'being so naughty it can be paired with fish.' In fact, many of our customers were told of the health benefits of red wine but liked the taste of whites. So Mark developed a low tannin, non-oak barreled red wine with a smooth taste to satisfy those people. The Nice wine is a bit sweeter and both are still some of our top sellers.

So eventually that teenager girl grew up and started working for her namesake. Tell us about that journey.

Marie: My dad always asked me to work elsewhere, so I worked in restaurants and retail stores throughout high school and college in Chicago – eventually getting a degree in Marketing/Management from DePaul University. There was talk about maybe someday coming back to Chantal but no serious discussions. I was always encouraged to follow my own path. A seminar on wine marketing resulted in me taking a graduate wine marketing program in Australia for a year. I made friends there who came from around the world, the program was fantastic and I met my husband Paul there – we met at a wine tasting. I came back to the States and worked for a few years at a wine retailer and then for a distributor,

got married and moved back to Traverse City in 2009. I had no interest in being ‘the daughter who works in the family business.’ But my degree at DePaul was tailored to the wine business and my advanced studies in Australia lend credibility to my work here.

And now, your husband Paul works here as well...

Marie: He’s a diesel mechanic by trade and now is our viticulturealist. Wine making can be labor intensive but there’s a lot of machinery involved as well and so he’s fixing things all the time – and I can’t tell you how handy that is to have a mechanic on staff!

Have you seen any tasting room trends over the years?

Marie: I think initially the customers gravitated toward sweeter wines but surprisingly our top five wines are very diverse – from a sweet late harvest Riesling to our Malbec, which is a dry red, with Naughty and Nice and a bubbly called Celebrate in there. The major shift we’ve seen here is lower wine by the bottle sales and an increase in wine by the glass, with the change in the law, allowing us to charge for a ‘tasting.’ There is no quantity measurement placed on what a ‘tasting’ is but our customers have really taken to a glass of wine with some food. Of course, with our view up here, it’s a great setting for that as well.

What is your current percentage of sales from the tasting room?

Marie: We’ve gone from virtually all our sales being out of the tasting room in the early years to about 50/50 with statewide retail distributors. But the profit margin drops significantly with each set of hands that touch the bottle before it gets to the consumer.

Yes, that is true in the book business as well. Your parent’s story would make a great book.



Marie: Well, now that you mention it, we did delve into the publishing business when my mother wrote about her journey and put it with her favorite recipes. And she is a shameless promoter (laughing). She has a captive audience at breakfast with guests staying at the B&B. She’s such a charmer and puts the bite on everyone of them – ‘did you know the recipe for what you’re eating this morning is in my book?’ At eighty years old, you get a hug, a story and an invite to buy her book (laughing).

Ask her if she’d add this book to her pitch? Much thanks Marie.

Northwest Leelanau

LARRY MAWBY

CONQUERING THE SPARKLING WINE WORLD



When you blend a boy growing up in the cherry orchards south of Suttons Bay, with a English major college graduate, and then add an expert in making sparkling wine, you get the one and only Larry Mawby. Since he planted his first grape vines in 1973, Larry has carved a niche and become a genuine ‘character’ in the Michigan wine industry.

The Mawby tradition of fruit growing began with his grandfather’s peach and apple orchards in the Rockford area. Then his father bought a cherry orchard on the Leelanau Peninsula in 1953 and Larry eventually managed the family farm until he opened the tasting room of L. Mawby Vineyards in 1978.

“At that time, there were only three wineries up here – Boskydel, Leelanau Cellars and Chateau Grand Traverse,” said Larry. “No one

had a clear picture of what varieties would grow well or even what consumers would want to buy.” His first wine was called Picnic Rose, which was a pink wine ‘with all the grapes put together.’

The decision to concentrate solely on sparkling wines using the champagne method was made in 1996, and then, in 2004, he added the M. Lawrence brand.

Although, there are more wineries in Michigan making sparkling wines, there still is only one Larry Mawby.

Interview with Larry Mawby:

How many people told you that sparkling wines couldn’t be made in northern Michigan?

Larry: I don’t know because I never asked anybody. You have to remember back then there wasn’t a norm, there was barely the notion of growing grapes for wine up north – it was still very questionable. That’s why there were only four wineries for nearly a decade. Everyone was waiting for one of us to fail.

So what eventually steered you in the direction of making just sparkling wines?

Larry: It was a logical consequence of looking at the grape varieties that grow well here and determining those grapes could make a nice sparkling wine and be reliable every year. As Clint Eastwood said in Magnum Force, ‘a man’s got to know his limitations.’ For me, it was realizing I couldn’t make both table wines and sparkling wines and be the best at either one. When there were only

a dozen wineries up here, people couldn't visit them all in one trip and now there are more than 30, so it's even worse – people have to make choices. We're working on getting the message out – if you come through our tasting room doors, I sure hope you're looking for sparkling wines (laughing).

Is the process of making table wines and sparkling wines very different?

Larry: At the heart, winemaking is pathetically simple – you break the skin of the berry and yeast starts consuming the sugar, producing alcohol; you separate the solids and liquids – wine; let it go – vinegar. With sparkling wine, you capture the CO₂ from fermentation to create another fermentation. Actually, you grow the grapes different and really, looking at the process holistically, everything is different.

Your Talisman Brut appeared in The Great Wines of America book. Has that wine won you the most awards?

Larry: No, actually we've done as well with several wines in competitions. I'm not a big fan of wine competitions. They serve two purposes – as an ego-stroker for the winemaker or winery owner and they're useful for marketing. But they don't say anything about the quality of the wines. I appreciate the awards but it's not reality.

Why is that?

Larry: What winning means is on that day, that group of tasters favored that wine. Take the same group, the next day they'll probably pick a different wine. Take a different group the same day and they'll probably pick a different wine. A judge might be trying 300 different wines and most people's palate fatigues after 30 or 40 – so, even the order they taste them is a factor. The true test is producing a quality wine that people enjoy year after year.

It says L. Mawby on the label, which in itself puts a little more pressure on the winemaker. Why did you decide to put your moniker on the label?

Larry: I thought about it a lot and ultimately, I decided if I was going to be serious about making wines, I would put my name out there. But it wasn't an ego thing or a smart marketing tool either – people couldn't pronounce it and kept saying 'what's an L. Mawby?' (laughing).

Do the names of your wines reflect your personality?

Larry: They all are a part of me, so, yes they reflect my personality. But there are a number of different explanations for the concept of a wine's name. Sometimes it's a characteristic of the wine. Sometimes you have a name and the wine is created to assume that role. Some are whimsical and some are traditional. The true art of winemaking is when you make a wine that tastes like its name.

What is the primary difference between the L. Mawby wines and the M. Lawrence wines?

Larry: The L. Mawby wines are bottle-fermented and take two or three years to come out for sale. The M. Lawrence wines are tank fermented and are ready in months.

If you were the czar of the wine industry, what would you do?

Larry: Well, considering the aspiration for our wine is world domination, I'm stunned by the potential (laughing). Seriously, I would make the 3-tier system optional instead of mandatory...but I would also make daily wine consumption mandatory as well (laughing).

Actually, that doesn't surprise me at all...thanks Larry.

RELAX WITH BOTH FEET UP AT LEFT FOOT CHARLEY WINERY



First, Left Foot Charley is really Bryan Ulbrich. Second, you know there's a story behind that – more, later. Third, it's hard to believe you can kick back and enjoy a nice glass of wine while surrounded by the ambiance of the former Northern Michigan Asylum in Traverse City. Believe it!

“Americans can finally relax,” says winemaker and proprietor Bryan Ulbrich. “People used to always say ‘let’s go out for a beer or a drink’ – they rarely said ‘let’s go out for a glass of wine’ – well, that’s finally changing. We want to take the wine tasting experience to the next level and make it an everyday experience.”

Originally from suburban Chicago, Ulbrich used to visit the Traverse City area spending summer vacations with his grandparents. After going off to college, first in Indiana then Arizona, Bryan returned in 1995 and decided he didn't want to leave.

Having learned the rudimentary workings of the business while employed at a winery out west, he and his soon to be bride Jennifer realized northern Michigan was the place to settle. After answering a “winery help needed” ad from the newspaper, Ulbrich began an “all-encompassing” apprenticeship with Peninsula Cellars in 1996. “Dave Kroupa (vineyard owner) taught me how to fix things, build things and work the land. Lee Lutes (winemaker) taught me how to dress, wear comfortable shoes, ferment grapes and sell wine (laughing).”

After Lutes moved on to Black Star Farms, Ulbrich continued making award-winning wines at Peninsula Cellars until he took the leap and produced his own vintage in 2004. Left Foot Charley became a reality in 2006 and is located in what is now known as The Village at Grand Traverse Commons.

Interview with Bryan Ulbrich:

Ok, let's get it out of the way...you are Left Foot Charley – explanation please.

Bryan: Yes, I am Left Foot Charley but the origins are somewhat vague. My mother always liked Charles Schultz, so, in honor of Charlie Brown, I was tagged with the nickname at an early age. But recently we've discovered it might have also been a WWII era substitute phrase for swearing. My grandfather was a WWII vet but so far, no one in the family is confessing, so we're still investigating (laughing).

You got started just prior to a huge expansion in the Michigan wine industry. What was it like before the explosion in winery numbers?

Bryan: I think there were only three wineries on Old Mission Peninsula and maybe a half dozen on Leelanau. But in the late 1990's and early 2000's, there was a large influx of investment money and, although some have changed hands now, to my knowledge none of them have gone under. I used to go to the Michigan Annual Meetings and knew everyone there. Now, you really need a nametag.

What are the biggest differences you see in starting a winery back then and now?

Bryan: There is a radical difference in how the money is invested – especially in the areas of planting, the vine structure and preparing the soils. The amount spent on the winery itself is staggering as well. It's not the sexy image of the old man tilling the hillside with his horse anymore. To get into the international wine conversation, we need modern tools and that is very expensive. Just look at the crush pad at Chateau Grand Traverse – its on par with anything in the world. I look at our facility and just shake my head at how far we've come.

Has this new technology had an effect on the quality of Michigan wines?

Bryan: Yes, a dramatic improvement. With new techniques, better equipment, higher quality personnel and higher quality fruit, Michigan is producing great tasting wines that have changed the perception in the entire wine industry. Out on the road, selling wine, it's gone from 'your wine sucks' to 'that's not bad' to 'we want to feature your wine!'

So, it's a tough road out there selling Michigan wine...

Bryan: In the early days, it was brutal. But Michigan wineries have worked hard to not only improve the quality of wines we produce but to work on all those cynics and convert them to customers. It's so nice when someone calls today and NEEDS ten cases right now and you can say 'I'm sorry – I'm all out but I can get one case out of my library or I can put you on the list for next year's vintage.' That makes this business a lot more fun.

You don't grow your own grapes but rather get them from local vineyards. How does that work?

Bryan: Our model is more expensive than if we just bought the juice. We treat the growers better than a market-based model. Their take is based on the bottle price rather than sugar levels or chemistry – they're paid on historical quality. Its more than the money, they want a reputation for producing high quality grapes, which in turn makes a better and higher priced wine. It has worked very well for both sides and quite frankly couldn't be done without cooperation and a good working relationship.

When did you get the vision for Left Foot Charley?

Bryan: It started with offering to salvage a portion of a new vineyard owner's crop. That turned into 200 bottles of Riesling, which then evolved into working with a couple of custom clients to build a custom crushing facility using a co-op type model for producing wine. We took the leap and settled on trying to build a winery in town rather than on one of the traditional peninsula wine trails.

And so the Village, as a location became a reality...

Bryan: The renovation of this whole facility has been fantastic and we believe in the Village concept. I like old buildings and the whole re-purposing idea. Our winery is located in the Asylum's laundry building. I showed my wife the blown out windows and the 20 years of dirt and bird droppings and to her credit, she just said 'Whatever, if you believe in it.' So, I took all of our savings (laughing) and we're still here.

How does your operation differ from the traditional winery tasting rooms?

Bryan: Their model is based on a 30-minute turnover – taste the wine, buy the wine, move on. We expect our customer to stay longer, that's why we put in stools and tables. We cater to the locals as well as the tourist. It's patterned after a more European model – wine by the glass, a little bit of food and it works. Hard ciders have been a huge addition to our tasting room. It adds to the atmosphere, the image of the winery and softens the wine edge.

You have reasonably priced wines but is it just the quality that raises the price?

Bryan: In reality, for a small winery, it's the people – the number of hands - look at a bottle of wine and think of the number of hands that have worked to make it possible. That is a rather simplistic explanation but we can mechanize the process and make cheaper wine. Without those hands, it would be mostly machinery. It's the human touch that adds the expense but isn't wine worth it?

Indeed it is, thanks Bryan.

Northeast

THE DAYS OF WINE AND ROSES AT ROSE VALLEY WINERY IN ROSE CITY



There are few roses but there is plenty of good wine just a few blocks from of the main intersection in the small town of Rose City in Ogemaw County. Adam Kolodziejski, the owner of the Rose Valley Winery, is the magician behind taking ordinary grapes and making extraordinary wines.

The son of a Polish immigrant, Adam grew up just nineteen miles east of the winery in Hale, Michigan. It is there on the old homestead farm, which he now calls Hunting Hawk Vineyard, where he planted nearly thirty varieties of grapes.

Many of the vines are native to Michigan but he also brought in a multitude of cold-hardy grapes that have thrived under his care.

From humble beginnings, Adam quickly understood the value of stretching the dollar. “I learned you can make three cups of tea from one tea bag if it’s properly cared for,” he chuckled. When he discovered he was not ready for college yet, he joined the Merchant Marines. Several years later, he discovered the mail hadn’t caught up to him in quite a while (which included a few military induction notices) and there was a U.S. Marshal waiting on the docks in Baltimore accusing him of dodging the draft. Some fast talking was followed by a 4-year stint in the Navy.

The GI Bill helped him get a teaching certificate from CMU but after one year in the classroom – ‘that was enough for me’ – he worked in industry and eventually started his own metal manufacturing company.

Years later, Adam won first prize in a contest – either \$25,000 in gold pesos or a plot of land at a retirement resort in Mexico. Being a farmer’s son, he took the land. As age sixty approached, he thought he’d check it out. “It quickly became apparent why my neighbors were all drinking tequila at the Cantina by mid-morning,” he recalled. “Everyone, including me, was bored silly. But one of the non-curriculum skills I learned in college was making wine. So, I packed up, flew home, started planting vines and making plans to build a winery. I guess retirement wasn’t in my genetic pool.”

He broke ground in 2004 and opened Rose Valley Winery in 2006.

Interview with Adam Kolodziejski:

How did you decide on your winery name?

Adam: It's a nice catchy name...it's in Rose City but there are some restrictions on using names of actual geographic places. The city welcomed me in with my manufacturing business and I wanted to show my appreciation and support by giving at least partial identity to them. I've been here for seven years and I still get a few locals in who say 'I didn't know there was a winery just down the street!' I just smile and tell'em 'you gotta get out more.'

You also identified some rivers and lakes in the area when naming your wines.

Adam: Yes, like our Rifle River Red and Lake Ambrose White. We also sold Clear Lake White for a couple years but the Feds made us stop because Clear Lake is a viticulture area in California. It seems I can only get away with things for a short time before the law catches up with me (laughing).

What is your opinion on box wines?

Adam: My experience with box wines is limited. I bought a box of wine once and put it in the refrigerator. I drank and drank and drank from that darn box and it seemed like it took two years to finish it. So I decided to sell my wine by the bottle because I want my customers to come back eventually (laughing).

How did you decide on the wines you make?

Adam: Sometimes it's 'I want to try this' and other times it's arguing with Steve (the winemaker). Our goal is to make very traditional wines and make them well, which does limit us on the wild and crazy things you can do. For instance, our Red Table Wine I think is well made and doesn't need to be 'tickled up' with subtle nuances to make it adventuresome. It stands on it's own and we hope our customers appreciate that. There is a market for what I call 'pop' wines for \$4 a bottle but we're trying to stick with a conventional wine list and not venture too far.

Usually, it's the bigger wineries that can afford to market a loss leader or rock bottom priced wine. How do you price your wines?

Adam: In our case, it's a labor of love because we're not getting rich. But we've also chosen to stay small. Our cost, what the market will bear, sweat equity and profit margin are all factors. One day we'll figure out how to make some money (laughing).

What have you found to be the most satisfying part of owning a winery?

Adam: When all those women come in on a Saturday and they want to meet and give the winemaker a hug. I give'em all a big hug and sometimes they come back for seconds – no thirds though because my wife doesn't like it. Really, I do enjoy interacting with the customers. We get a lot of first-time visitors who've never been to a winery. So we give them a tour and take the time to educate them on how to drink wine. I also get a lot of satisfaction from growing and making wine from a new style grape, the cold-hardy varieties that were developed specifically for northern climates.

How have they done at your vineyard?

Adam: They have done very well. They don't freeze out in the winter and bud out late in the spring, which avoids the late spring frost and it's generally more disease resistant than European vinifera. We can harvest our grapes by Labor Day weekend or if we consult our weather crystal ball and if we see a mild fall in the forecast, some years it's late October before we're taking in the last of the harvest. It gives Michigan winemakers a lot of latitude.

To get specific, the sugar content of grapes is measured in 'brix.' What are normal sugar levels in Michigan grapes compared to California grapes?

Adam: Many times a Michigan grape never gets the weather to reach their peak or ideal level, which would be somewhere around 21-22 brix. California grape sugar levels are around the mid-20's. But they have the opposite problem – they struggle to keep the grapes from over-ripening. Once a grape gets too ripe, the acid levels drop dramatically and the flavors are sweet but bland – no essence left that gives wine that special/interesting taste. The sugar/acid balance is key to making good wine and the hybrid grapes give Michigan winemakers the opportunity to fine-tune that balance.

In your opinion, what makes Rose Valley Winery unique?

Adam: There is an old saying: 'if you're going to make wine – make wine; if you're going to grow grapes – grow grapes...don't do both.' But I'm Polish, so here I am doing both. I also point out on the tours that I flunked Chemistry in school (laughing). We want our guests to experience a warm friendly atmosphere – to enjoy our traditional but unique wines. Our staff works hard to put smiles on their faces and hopefully, they leave with a desire to come visit us again.

Mission accomplished! I'm already looking forward to my next visit. Thanks Adam.

SPIES, PIES AND WINE AT ROBINETTES APPLE HAUS & WINERY



Just a few miles north of Grand Rapids, you can immerse yourself into the countryside of the Robinette family-owned fruit orchards. It's hard to believe you're within sight of a busy 4-lane highway. Follow the smells of the cider mill and bakery, which will take you back to the real treat – the wine cellar in the lower floor of Robinette's beautifully restored barn.

It all started when Barzilla Robinette bought the farm in 1911, which was called the Oakland Fruit Farm back then. Now the fourth generation Robinettes are operating the 125 acres located on 4-Mile Rd. west of East Beltline Hwy. "I think my husband Ed, who is the eldest son, is 'officially' the President of the business," said Manager Alicia Robinette. "We don't really make much of titles around here (laughing) – we all just dig in and do what needs to be done." And there's plenty to get done.

For more than a half-century they operated as a wholesale apple supplier and then gravitated to retail when Ed's father Jim built the cider mill in 1971. The Apple Haus came along two years later, which includes the bakery, a lunch counter and fresh fruit market. The winery was added in 2006, with Ed's brother Bill serving as the winemaker.

Alicia was raised five minutes from the farm but she met Ed in the high school band – she played clarinet and he played the trumpet. They got married and she pursued a business degree. The farm needed a manager, so after working with several other businesses she came on board. "My biggest responsibility, by far, is to make sure payroll gets out on time (laughing)." The farm usually has around 10 employees during winter hours but expands to over 100 during the fall harvest.

"Pick-your-own is fairly new for us but the winery has brought in a whole new batch of customers," Alicia said. "We currently offer 21 Michigan-made wines, with the latest additions being Royal Raspberry Spumante and Bill's Special Cider."

No doubt the customers are getting the royal treatment and finding Robinette Cellars to be a very special place.

Interview with Alicia Robinette:

Your labels all have very bright colors with a robin on them...who came up with that idea?

Alicia: Ed thought it was a good way to identify our product on the shelf and the robin helps customers remember our name. The barn was remodeled in 1985 for office space, a dining area and the gift shop. The tasting room itself is on the ground floor, which used to be the stables for the horses back when that was the mode of transportation. They were hitched to wagon to haul the fruit into Grand Rapids, which was quite a trip back in the day. It has a wine cellar feel and atmosphere so we all thought Robinette Cellars sounded right.

One of your wines is Barzilla's Brew and another is Bill's Special Cider. What inspired those names?

Alicia: Barzilla Robinette is Ed's great-grandfather who bought the farm in 1911. Family lore says he told everyone 'feel free NOT to name any of the children after me' and thankful no one has (laughing). But we did name our first wine after him. It's actually a biblical name. And Bill is our winemaker and we were sitting around trying to think of a name for Bill's latest creation. By consensus, we came up with Bill's Special Cider – I don't know what makes it special but it tastes good! As you can see, we don't spend a lot of time or money on market research.

It seems many of the Michigan orchards are adding a winery to their operation for another money stream. Was that the case for Robinette Cellars?

Alicia: Bill had been making ciders and wines for quite a while and there were several other fruit orchards that led the way. By comparison, we are a small operation and we are very vulnerable to Mother Nature. A good example was 2012, where it got into the 80's in March and then there was a big freeze in April. We lost all but a little of our entire fruit crop. So we are always looking for alternative income sources. The winery was a natural extension to our overall business plan. We received a lot of help from Uncle John's, Black Star and Fenn Valley wineries. It's amazing how willing some people are to lend a helping hand.

In good years, when you aren't incurring the wrath of Mother Nature, you grow a good variety of fruits. Does Bill make the choices for wines or is that by consensus as well?

Alicia: Bill makes what he likes, which is usually wines that are on the dry side. We give him input and sometimes he listens – sometimes he doesn't (laughing). Although we do have some people who prefer dry wines, most of our customers like the sweeter fruit wines. So we're always encouraging Bill to go sweeter.

I would imagine you get a very diverse demographic in your tasting room. But is there a common question that almost everyone asks?

Alicia: 'How is hard cider made?' 'How do you go from apples to fresh juice to hard cider?' And don't ask me to explain it – that's Bill's area (laughing). We do actually get requests for 5 or 10 gallons of fresh cider to take home and ferment for their own hard cider, to which I say 'go for it.' Surprisingly, a lot of people don't realize you can make wine from fruit – they think all wines are made from just

grapes. But that's one of the fun things about wine. If you can get it to ferment, you can make wine from dandelions, rhubarb – I even saw someone had made wine out of tomatoes.

So many of your activities here are family-oriented. Was it difficult adding wines to your marketing strategy?

Alicia: Some people are surprised we offer wines but I've found wines to be pretty easy to market. I would imagine any alcohol-based product wouldn't be that difficult. The exception is wine sales online, which is still a hassle with all the hoops you have to go through but that's understandable.

Is there a plan to expand Robinette Cellars to retail stores in the future?

Alicia: The Cellars has been a valuable addition to the operation and I would love to see Bill get carried away with more wines. But right now it would require a new building and bigger tanks to dramatically increase production. I see it in the future but we'll take baby steps first. Unless you've got an independent money source, so many times a business that expands rapidly usually ends up in financial trouble. We obviously want to stay in business (laughing), but really, we're providing our customers with good tasting Michigan wines and we'll grow with the demand.

Just ship Mother Nature a case of Barzilla's Brew to keep her in a good mood and I'm sure Robinettes' will be around for a long time. Thanks Alicia.

UNCLE JOHN'S FRUIT HOUSE WINERY WITH UNCLE MIKE BECK AT THE HELM



There has been a Beck fruit farm in St. Johns, Michigan since great-great grandfather Frank Beck started growing apples there in late 1880's. Of course, he probably never envisioned the big white barn becoming an iconic sight and tourist destination along U.S. 27 either. It's much more than a farm and cider mill. Since 2003, guests have been able to stop into the Fruit House Winery for a sample of Beck's world-class hard cider.

Not only did the farm become a major apple supplier but they also were one of the largest suppliers of beeswax to the U.S. Army during WWII – at the time, one of the main sources of waterproofing. By the late 1960's, John Beck had taken charge of the orchard operation but it was rapidly becoming difficult to turn a profit in the wholesale apple business. The Beck's needed to diversify.

Thanks to the advice from an MSU Cooperative Extension Agent, they began to concentrate on the 'value added' retail side. "Our commodity was apples for wholesale but we changed the focus and expanded the use of apples," said fifth generation farmer Mike Beck. "We started making cider, pies, carmel apples, wine, etc."

Today, it's not unusual to see a line of cars, buses and travel vans turning into Uncle John's. "It seems every year, our orchard gets smaller and the parking area gets bigger," said Mike.

Interview with Mike Beck:

Uncle John is actually your father, the fourth generation Beck to run the Beck orchard. But how did the farm get the name Uncle John's Cider Mill?

Mike: There wasn't any in-depth marketing research done, I can tell ya (laughing). A bunch of his nieces and nephews were helping him clean out the big barn to convert it into a cider mill. They said 'what are you gonna call the cider mill Uncle John?' It kinda rolled off their tongues and stuck – very scientific don't ya think?

It has grown into a destination point with a multitude of activities. Tell us about that progression.

Mike: I can show you old pictures of the roadside stands but Uncle John's truly is an entertainment center for the family – plenty of things for the kids to do while mom & dad sample the cider or shop. Believe it or not, we may have been one of the very first in the entire country to do a corn maze back in

the late 1980's – we were inspired by the hedge maze in the movie *The Shining*. Now, they are everywhere. No apple goes to waste either. The best ones go into our hard ciders but even the unworthy apples get used – we built a big slingshot so people could shoot'em at targets.

What is the process you use to come up with the names of your hard ciders?

Mike: We are the 'simpletons' of naming products – it's pretty straightforward – the name is what you're getting. For example, we make a premium hard cider using exclusively Russett apples and call it... Russett. Another premium hard cider made with American and English apples, we named Melded, which is about as fancy as I get. I refuse to make a product that I can't pronounce (laughing).

Is there a preference in the type of closure you're using?

Mike: We use a synthetic cork and I've never had a problem. But if I had the equipment, I'd go to twist caps in a heartbeat. All of the premium wines in New Zealand and quite a few in California are going in that direction.

I'm assuming each variety of apple gives the wine or cider a distinct flavor but how many varieties of apple are there?

Mike: I use primarily a dozen different varieties for my ciders and, yes, each has a very different flavor. But I've got probably 50 different varieties right here on the farm. In the United States there are probably 3,000 and worldwide, maybe double that number. And those are just the named ones. One bee pollinates different trees, several bees pollinate the same tree – all the apples are just a little bit different – that's the wonder of cross pollinated fruit and brings out the wonderful flavors in our ciders.

So, there is cider, hard cider and apple wine. What is the difference?

Mike: Around the world, cider would be alcoholic but in North America cider is the term used for fresh juice. When talking with other winemakers, we use the term cider and imply that it has alcohol. Americans generally have accepted the term hard cider to have alcohol in it (6-9%). Adding sugar adds to the alcohol content to make apple wine (10-14%).

Although hard cider has been around for centuries, it seems like a recent discovery in the wine industry, especially here in Michigan. Is this true?

Mike: It IS the biggest trend in the alcohol beverage industry – that may sound a bit prejudiced – well, sure I am. But the fact is hard cider has shown over 20% growth each of the last four years and a 50% rise in the last six months of 2012.

To what do you attribute to this dramatic upturn?

Mike: Michigan is actually poised to be the great cider hotbed. We bring more varieties up to commercial production than any other state. There are larger apple growing regions. Washington is the largest by far but they concentrate on the 'pretty apples' for the grocery store – the Red Delicious, Golden Delicious, Granny Smith and Galas. New York produces more but primarily in McIntosh

varieties – Cortland, Spartan & Empire. We have at least 40 commercial varieties – Michigan has so much more diversity to use in cider production. That’s why our ciders are the best.

So, use a nice wine to describe yourself.

Mike: I’m a Cabernet Sauvignon – big, bold...I was going to say understated but I’ve never had a Cabernet that was understated and no one would believe I was either (laughing).

I’ll toast a big, bold hard cider to you. Thanks Mike.

Three Tier Distribution System

Distributors

THIS WINES FOR YOU FABIANO BROTHERS DISTRIBUTOR



When the Fabiano family opened a business in Italy in 1885, they sold fruit, vegetables and homemade wine. Over 125 years later, they have grown to become the largest Anheuser-Busch distributor under one roof in Michigan. That roof is a new state of the art, 200,000 sq. ft. headquarters facility in Bay City, which opened in 2010. They ditched the produce but still sell wine – lots of wine.

“This is still a family-owned business that has made a huge commitment to the wine industry in Michigan,” said Gordy Dalziel, Director of Sales and Marketing - Wine Division at Fabiano’s. “We have over 200 North American labels of wine in our portfolio and we’re always looking to expand, especially right here in our state. There are exciting new wines being produced all the time in Michigan.”

Gordy came to Fabiano Bros. just as they were moving their distribution operation to its new location from Mt. Pleasant where they had opened for business in 1919. He brought over 30 years experience working in the wholesale beverage industry, with 23 of those years with the E J Gallo Wine Company as a rep for the Upper Peninsula and most of northern Michigan.

“The Gallo and Fabiano companies have similar cultures, strong values and a willingness to give back to the community,” said Gordy. “The transition to Fabiano’s was smooth – right place and the right time for me.”

While working in the Traverse City/Petoskey/Alpena areas, he had an opportunity to observe the wine industry throughout its growing pains and struggle for recognition. “Michigan wineries are dedicated to producing quality wines,” he said. “They are starting to get regional support and I see it only getting better.”

Gordy’s staff is marketing seven different price catalogs in 26 Michigan counties. They are part of a workforce that helped Fabiano Brothers recently receive an Ambassador of Excellence Award in the beverage industry. Through performance, service and Gordy’s leadership, Fabiano’s continues to put Michigan wines on the wine map of the world.

Interview with Gordy Dalziel:

What do you use for criteria in selecting a wine for your portfolio?

Gordy: First and foremost, we evaluate how stable the company is and obviously, the taste profile. We're also very interested how the wine is packaged and how it fits in our portfolio. We look at how it may affect our current suppliers and what the long-term plans are...where are they going to be in the future.

How has the distribution marketing changed over the years?

Gordy: Wines used to be slow developing but now with the social media, marketing strategies are changing rapidly. You'll see people taking pictures of wines in stores and blogging immediately about pricing – 'I spotted this wine at this retailer for this price' or maybe at a restaurant, 'I'm here at the bar – I tried this wine – good deal, tastes great.' It's amazing how quickly the word spreads.

Are the distributors regulated as intensely as wineries?

Gordy: Yes, in certain areas, such as guidelines in pricing and promotions on or off premise. We have people here who keep everyone in line and our wholesale association keeps us up on the latest that's going on at the state and federal level. We also have our own checks and balances system in place with computerized ordering. For instance, we are restricted as to where we can sell certain wines in particular areas, so if the item is punched in for a non-sale county the computer tells us immediately.

How do you keep all those orders straight?

Gordy: Each wine is coded and the cart takes an employee right to the right place in the warehouse to pick up the right number of bottles. It helps reduce what we call 'mispicks.' We're running at about 98% efficiency on correct orders.

What are you seeing that is new and innovative with wines these days?

Gordy: I had someone bring in 'wine in a can' the other day. I haven't tried it yet (laughing) but I'm also not discounting it...yet. Wine by the keg is just becoming a more popular way to sell wine. Places like hotels, restaurants and wine bars are looking into this dispensing method. Good Harbor winery is supplying us with wine in a big cardboard box and it's all eco-friendly without a deposit.

What are you hearing from other distributors about Michigan wines?

Gordy: On the national front, I'm hearing about them becoming a more significant player. Currently, Michigan wines are doing well regionally and many distributors are talking about them being a tremendous opportunity, especially with the recent growth. They are being featured in restaurants in New York and Chicago and we expect them to continue expanding.

What are retailers saying about Michigan wines?

Gordy: Based on the recent growth over the past decade, more and more retailers are jumping on board. Many restaurants and wine bars are starting to feature Michigan wines on a particular night. They understand the importance of promoting locally and in state produced wines. Retailers are allotting more shelf space to Michigan wines. It's not just the big chain stores either. The independents are doing the same. They're being very supportive and it's great to see.

You have people coming in all the time with the latest and greatest wines. What is the strangest sales pitch you've heard?

Gordy: I've had people come in and try to sell me their wine using just a Powerpoint presentation. When I asked them to see the wine, they don't have any but they still want to know if I'm interested. I say 'sure, but at least come back with some wine so I can taste it (laughing).' I've had people show up with no labels on the bottle or I'll ask how many bottles can they produce and they'll say maybe 10 per day. It's a shock to their system when I have to tell'em I've got 1400 licences to supply. There's never a lack of creativity out there.

How has your palate evolved?

Gordy: I think over the years it has gotten better (laughing), if that makes sense. I'll admit I can be tricked – on the good side and bad. However, I have several 'go to' people who I rely on. We also have tastings with our sales team and rate the wines or go to outsiders like Gar Winslow of Midland or Jeff Opperman of Saginaw for their opinions. We stretch WAY beyond my palate to be sure the wine is right for us. I'm old school – I still like Zinfandel, which was very popular 20 years ago and I'm really starting to like the new red blends that are coming out.

So, pick a wine that best describes you...

Gordy: It would be aged well, smooth, well balanced with a clean finish. I would pick Baron Rothschild...now I'm a bit embarrassed because I don't usually talk much about myself.

Ok, so let's make you the Czar of the wine distribution system...what would you change?

Gordy: (laughing) I knew you'd eventually get around to a loaded question. I'll just say we take great pride in adhering to all the regulations in the current system and we try very hard to please everyone involved.

With the growth of Fabiano Brothers over the last 125 years, I'd say their Wine Division is pleasing quite a few wine drinkers these days. Thanks Gordy.

WINERY DIRECTORY SAMPLES

These are some samples of the full page, full color ads that appear in the back of the book.

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