



# Wine industry continues to flourish in northern lower Michigan

It may seem that international recognition for Michigan's wine industry has been a long time coming, but that doesn't bother groups like the Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council (MGWIC), or area vintners. They're just glad to be getting their due.

According to Linda Jones, executive director of MGWIC, a 10-member board and staff organized by the state's Department of Agriculture to stimulate industry growth and represent the concerns of wineries, grape growers, wine distributors and retailers, there are a number of developments on the horizon — the results of hard work behind the scenes that will help showcase the quality of the products statewide.

"Michigan is a great fruit-growing state, with our agricultural diversity second only to California," said Jones. "We have a long tradition of excellence, but wine is a relatively new fruit to be grown in north America, and as farmers here eye alternate crops, wine grapes are great for added value. Fruit plus tourism are our best industries and this is great place to start a winery. In 2001, we won more than 500 medals in 12 international and national competitions."

Jones said that her council has worked hard to develop relationships with national wine writers, such as those with Wine Spectator, considered to be the "bible" of the wine industry.

"It used to be that the major national publications weren't interested in small regions like ours because the wines weren't available in Los Angeles or New York, but an explosion of interest in regional wines and foods in North America has taken place," explained Jones.

This past December, she and her staff compiled about 30 of "the best wines Michigan had to offer," and sent them to Wine Spectator. It paid off in an article that will hit the stands on June 30.

Another strategy is to invite prominent wine figures to visit areas like Traverse City and help plan their itinerary, which was the case when Marguerite Thomas of the New York Times visited here May 8-10, inspecting all 16 wineries in the area. Noted wine critic Bill Rice from the Chicago Tribune spent a day in Traverse City this past February. Yet another way to reach key writers and lecturers is to invite them to judge at the annual Michigan State Fair wine competition, which will be held July 30 at MSU in East Lansing and will host writers from California and Kansas.

Jones also said that the international marketing department at the Department of Agriculture has been working to generate interest in Michigan with winemakers in Europe. Delegates recently went to the ProWein trade show in Germany, to represent regional interests on a worldwide basis and cultivate relationships to secure distribution rights for those winemakers interested in exporting. Larry Mawby of Suttons Bay, for example, has already signed a deal to export several of his sparkling wines, and it is hoped that this might be a catalyst for more interest in wines from this area.

"All of this is great news, because a new study commissioned by MSU documented that wines and wineries contribute \$75 million to the state's economy, and of that, \$16 million is spent by leisure travelers visiting the wine regions at shops, hotels and the

like," said Jones. "That means unlimited potential, but we need to expand the industry and provide more capital investment for wineries, which is an expensive, challenging field because it takes almost 10 years to see stability in the business and get a level of consistency."

Ken Fitzhugh, food & beverage director at Crystal Mountain Resort in Thompsonville, has another take on the drawing power of Michigan wines.

This November will mark the 3rd Annual Vintners Celebration at Crystal Mountain, a weekend celebrating local foods and wines that has doubled its number of business participants and event guests each year.

Different packages are available for the weekend depending on the level of participation and information and reservations are available by calling

(800)-968-7686, ext. 5100.

There will be a Friday evening opening hors d'oeuvres reception, followed on Saturday by classes on topics like food and wine pairing and wine education, along with an evening winemaker's dinner, this year featuring Nick Goldschmidt of Simi Wines of California. On Sunday there is a breakfast and special presentation. In between, there are many opportunities to sample, converse, ask questions, and take in the local sights, which include the Michigan Legacy Art Park on the grounds of Crystal Mountain, and the scenic nearby village of Beulah.

"The growth of this event reflects both the interest of the public and how important winemakers and their industry is to our success," said Fitzhugh. "We're all working to create a desti-

nation up here, and we know people are taking our world-class wines seriously. It's a real testament to the makers in the area, and to what a growing industry it is."

Jack Stegenga of Bower's Harbor Vineyards on Old Mission Peninsula has served two terms with MGWIC. He says that he believes all of the recent interest stems from the fact that a great spirit of cooperation exists all over the state by those who are passionate about wine.

"All of our wineries have really come along, and now, we can compete with most every store and country in the world with other regions," he said. "Our cold climate makes our wines cleaner and crisper. Plus, we've all been working together to get the word out, whether it's Leelanau Peninsula or southern Michigan."

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