



Cherry wine cigars are hot new trend

Gov. John Engler passed out cigars when leaders of the eight largest industrial nations met recently in Detroit for the International G-8 Energy Ministers meeting.

But these weren't your grandfather's cigars. Rather, they were cherry wine cigars made with a port-like dessert wine bottled at Leelanau County's Black Star Farms.

"For the whole state of Michigan, it was an opportunity to show our products and what can be done up in Michigan," said Michael Field, director of sales at Black Star Farms. "With products such as cherries, by turning them into brandies and ports and wines, you can actually turn a profit."

The Lansing-based Little Cigar Co., which sells specialty cigars at retail stores in New York City and elsewhere, plans to launch the new line of cherry cigars internationally on June 11. The Black Star Farms Sirius Cherry Cigar also will be available locally at Black Star Farms' tasting room for \$14.

Field met the cigar company owner — who already was producing cigars made with blueberry port from a Long Island, N.Y., winery — at the Mackinaw Hops of Fun festival last year.

"We had them try our cherry port and they liked it and developed the new cigar," Field said.

The cigar wrappers are soaked in the cherry dessert wine. Black Star's dessert wine is a port-like drink made from cherries that are fermented, just like regular wine, and then diluted with cherry brandy and aged one year in oak barrels.

Black Star Farms' Sirius Cherry dessert wine — not technically a port wine because it's not made in Portugal — took a double gold medal for best in class recently at the Los Angeles County Fair.

"For so long the wine industry has been California, California, California, and so for us to go out there and take best in class, it's an honor for the Michigan wine industry," Field said.

Like all other vintners, Jack Stegenga knows there is an important link between Michigan's agriculture industry and tourism. So he's found a way to connect the dots in a way that's both educational and entertaining.

Stegenga owns Bowers Harbor Vineyards, a family-run business since 1992 that specializes in white Vaniefra wines like Riesling, Chardonnay and Pinot Grigot, reds that include Merlot, Cabernet, Chancellor, DeChenoc and of course, cherry and spiced cherry varieties.

His latest way to showcase area wines and wineries is to offer customized bicycle tours on either Old Mission Peninsula or Leelanau Peninsula that give clients a completely unique way to experience the products with an insider's perspective.

Stegenga began the tours last year and word of mouth spread so rapidly that this season, there are even more options for combining tasting and traveling.

"The idea came about me thinking outside of the box about the different attractions that come with the winery and the tourism business," he said. "What this state is about here is tourism and agriculture, and wineries are a perfect comple-

ment to both. Bringing value to an agricultural product by selling retail on a farm is an ultimate complement, and one of the ways we make ambassadors of people who come to visit us is by teaching them about what we do. The bike tours seemed to tie everything together."

On Old Mission Peninsula, for example, instead of hopping in a car, a group of eight to 10 people with a guide (often Stegenga himself) take a bike and visit about four wineries (Chateau Chantal, Peninsula Cellars, Chateau Grand Traverse and Bowers Harbor Vineyards) on a 10-mile ride that lasts around four or five hours. In Leelanau County, groups use the trail system to take in destinations like Black Star Farms and L. Mawby. Stegenga is already finding that those who did one trip last year are now booking the other one this summer.

In either case, the bikes, helmets and water bottles are all provided, the terrain isn't overly challenging and the day is built around the preferences of the group. Most likely, there will be some time spent in the vineyards, which is often chosen as a spot for enjoying a gourmet box lunch, one of the winemakers will make time for a chat

and there will be special tasting opportunities.

"We try to make it special in that we provide a different experience than what someone would have on their own," said Stegenga. "We might do a tour in the back end of the operation and learn about distilling fruit into brandy, or seeing a bottling operation, or how grapes are pruned. The whole day is built around a personalized tour, which is where the guide comes in. We share a lot of anecdotes, because this is a business with a lot of human interest."

Stegenga knows a great deal about that, having served two terms on the Michigan Grape & Wine Council, among possessing a number of other business credentials that have proven useful in operating his vineyard.

"We're trying to do business in one of oldest industries in world, so we need to make it fun and educational so people get some ownership and then help us tell our story," he said.

The bike tours began in late spring and run seasonally through October, generally on one day a week, which can be a Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday or by appointment for a group special. With lunch, which might also be enjoyed at

an eatery on the tour route, the cost is around \$100 per person.

Stegenga likens the day to spending time on a golf course, but jokes that with his trip, there's no frustration in addition to being able to spend time with nice people on a pleasant afternoon filled with taste, culture and information. If anyone is uncertain about the adventure, he assures them that if he can do it, anyone can, adding that he hasn't lost anyone yet in the process.

"I've learned there's a lot of nice people out there who enjoy seeing agriculture at its best in terms of taking out raw product and bringing it to a glorious finish in an atypical setting," he concluded. "Most people love the hands-on experience of being around a winery and tasting the product on the premises and they also like knowing they don't have to be intimidated because they think they don't know enough about wines. The point is to enjoy them, whether they're expensive or cheap, with a screw cap or a cork. With the bikes, we just make it a wonderful, fun experience you will always remember."

For more information or reservations, call Stegenga at 223-7615.

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