



Fruit brandies are the latest winery product

Mark Johnson hopes to see a day when northern Michigan will be as well-known as Germany's Black Forest for producing fruit brandies.

"My hope is that we can develop a culture around fruit brandies, such as they have in Europe, so that after a fine dinner in Dallas or San Francisco or New York or Miami, people will have an Eau de Vie — a Michigan cherry or pear brandy — as a closing to their dinner," said Johnson, winemaker at Chateau Chantal.

Chateau Chantal, located on Old Mission Peninsula, began distilling its first brandies this

spring. Black Star Farms in Leelanau County also produces fruit brandy.

Industry experts extol the movement into brandy as another way to save the region's agricultural landscapes and market area products. Others say Michigan fruits are well suited for making high-quality brandies that rival the world's finest.

Fruit brandy production in Michigan could remain a small cottage industry, but with powerful backing — Michigan State University, the state Department of Agriculture and associations for grape, cherry, apple, plum and other fruit producers involved — Johnson said he

expects it will become much larger.

State lawmakers are responsible for enabling the fledgling industry. In the mid-1990s, the Michigan Legislature changed a law that required distillers to pay \$10,000 per year for licensing, "meaning you had to be a Jack Daniels or Hiram Walker to afford it," said Johnson.

The change instead allowed Michigan wineries to buy a \$100 annual license to distill on site. Since then, fruit-brandy distilleries have sprung up at various wineries, Chateau Chantal and Black Star Farms included. Downstate wineries, including St. Julian, also are jumping aboard.

The movement toward distilling is already positioning the state to be among the nation's largest fruit brandy-producing states. The United States is not well-known for fruit brandy production, and only a handful of fruit brandy distilleries exist in Connecticut, Oregon, Maryland and California.

"I kind of feel that on a good day, wow, we've got a clean slate, now we can blow people away with this," Johnson said. "Americans have never developed a taste for this. It's a wide-open market."

After the state legislature changed the distillery law, Johnson traveled to Germany with an MSU official and others to tour production facilities and visit still makers. Johnson ended up ordering three stills from the Christian Carl Co. in

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**Mark Johnson, winemaker
Chateau Chantal.**

Goeppingen, Germany. Then he ordered another one for Black Star Farms.

In February, Johnson began making his first batch of cherry brandy. Brandy production was delayed by prohibition-era laws that ban distilleries in residences — Chateau Chantal's owners live above the winery — and the winery eventually built a separate distillation building.

Chateau Chantal expects to distill about 2,000 bottles of brandy this year. The 375-ml. bottles — half a fifth — are expected to sell for \$30 to \$40 each. The winery intends to distill cherry, pear and apple brandy.

"The sky's the limit," Johnson said. "We can do any fruit you can imagine, but at first we don't want to get too crazy. First we want to concentrate on different kinds of cherries — Balaton, Montmorency."

Already, brandy-making has saved at least one family farm. Old Mission Peninsula's last remaining pear farmer intended to stop farming, but Johnson

recently told him he'd buy up everything he has to offer.

"If we can save four acres of agriculture just in that one product, that's just great," Johnson said.

Eventually, Chateau Chantal hopes to grow pears inside of bottles, like other distillers do.

"First you have to have brandy so you can immediately fill the bottle," Johnson said. "It's a fantastic selling tool. People wonder, 'How did you get the pear in the bottle?' Like, 'How did you get the ship in the bottle?' It's just fun."

Brandy is produced by first creating a fruit wine: mashing the fruit, adding yeast and allowing it to ferment. That fermented mixture then is sent through a distiller. A 43-gallon still can produce about 1½ gallons of brandy in two hours. Brandies are aged for three months to several years in glass, stainless steel or barrels before being diluted and bottled.

Traditional brandy — Eau de Vie, or "water of life" as the French call it — such as Cognac are made from grape wines.

Fruit brandy quality hinges on fruit quality — a fact that positions Michigan well for reaching high-caliber production rapidly.

"No. 1, we have a lot of fruit," Johnson said. "No. 2, we're nationally recognized for the quality of our fruit. Think about strawberries from California, Texas, Florida, the ones we get every spring that are big and look beautiful but you bite into them and there's no flavor."

Michigan's cooler climate, especially those mini-climates on area peninsulas surrounded by waters, allow slower ripening of fruit, which helps retain natural flavors.

"That's why Michigan strawberries that we pick in June taste so much better," he said.

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