

History of winemaking in northern lower Michigan

Michigan's winemaking history spans two centuries. In the period just before the Civil War, disease destroyed America's largest wine-producing region along the Ohio River near Cincinnati. The remnants of that industry migrated to the already recognized grape-growing region along Lake Erie.

By 1880, vineyards extended past Toledo into Southeast Michigan. In 1919, there were eight wineries near Monroe, none of which survived Prohibition.

Southwest Michigan's wine industry fared much better. Also a recognized wine region in 1880, Southwest Michigan received help from an unlikely source. Temperance advocate Dr. Thomas Welch created the first "unfermented wine," as it was originally called, for use in his church's communion service. It quickly caught on with the public. The newly formed Welch's Grape Juice Company encouraged planting of the Concord grapes from which their product was made. The opening of a Welch's plant in Lawton, near Paw Paw, in 1919, helped the area's grape growers survive Prohibition.

A taste of the times

The red-skinned Concord and similar white-skinned Niagara varieties are close relatives of vines native to eastern North America. They are often called by their scientific name, *vitis*

labrusca. With our contemporary wine industry built on Cabernet and Chardonnay, we find it hard to imagine a wine industry based on Concord or Niagara. New York, Ohio, Missouri and Michigan were large wine producers, and nearly all the grapes used were varieties like these. These pungent, usually sweet and often fortified wines were extraordinarily popular. In the 1940s and 1950s Michigan wineries were so successful at meeting consumer demand, that 80 percent of all wines sold in Michigan were produced in Michigan.

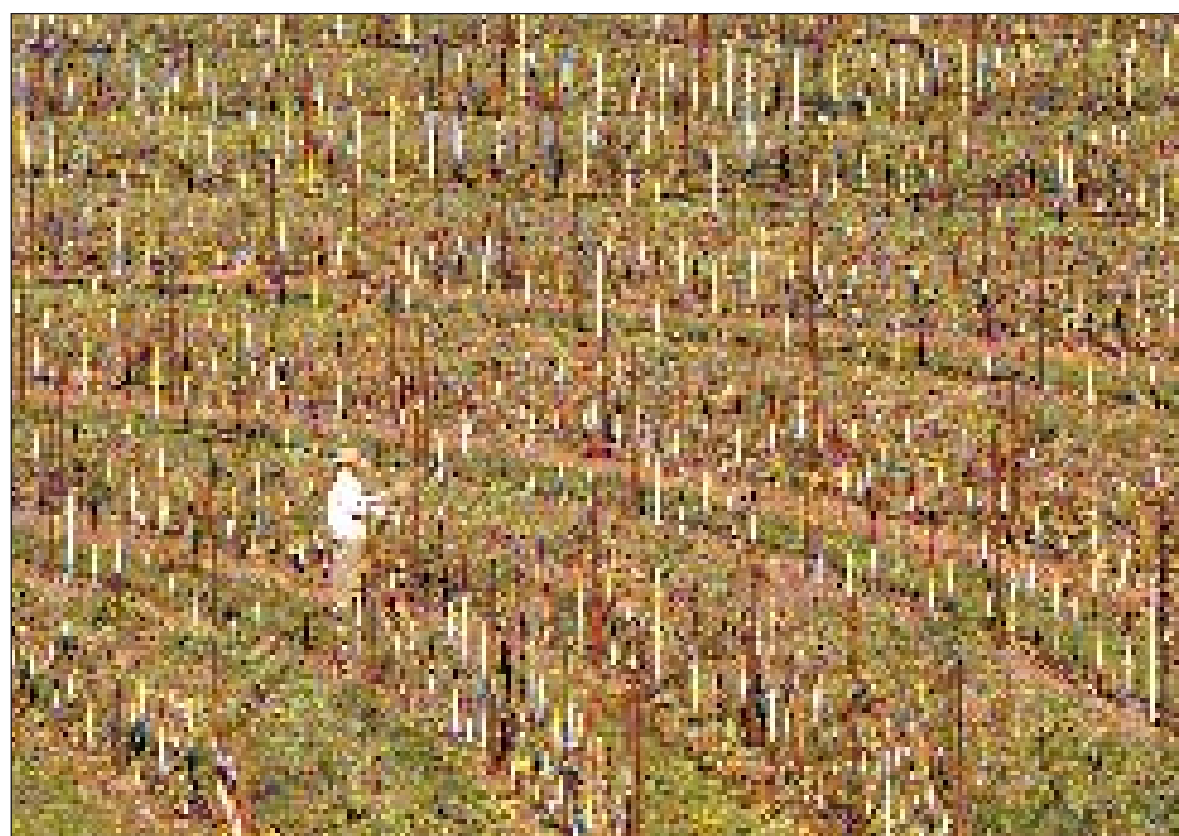
The times they are a changing

The 1960s saw many changes come to America, including a change in the kinds of wines we drank. By 1968, Americans' tastes had changed enough that, for the first time, consumers purchased more of the drier table wines than the sweeter wines.

This was a revolution in American culture. And it was a revolution that eastern wineries in general and Michigan wineries in particular were ill suited to accommodate. The grapes that worked so well up until then failed miserably to make the drier table wines to which consumers were flocking. Of Michigan's highly successful wineries from the 1950s only one has survived.

A new beginning

In retrospect, this near complete housecleaning of the Michigan wine industry forced it to evolve into a truly



Photo/David L. Fox

fine wine industry with the ability to produce world-class wines. The new owners and winemakers were dedicated to producing the finest European-style table wines and planted grape varieties with this in mind.

The modern Michigan wine industry is built upon two major grape types. Hybrid varieties, sometimes called French-American hybrids, produce good quality table wines and are also cold-hardy and disease-resistant. With names like Vignoles and Chambourcin, hybrids deserve to be better known than they are.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the first hybrid grape varieties were introduced into Southwest Michigan. Southwest Michigan continues to produce large amounts of juice grapes - enough to make Michigan the fourth largest grape-growing state. But this area also produces about half of Michigan's wine grapes.

A new region

In the 1970s, a new wine region was born in northwest lower Michigan near Traverse City. On the Leelanau Peninsula, Bernie Rink planted the first French-American hybrid vines. Larry

Mawby, Bruce Simpson and others soon followed. Over on the Old Mission Peninsula, Ed O'Keefe became convinced that Riesling and other vinifera varieties could also be grown. He was proven correct. Today, both the Leelanau and Old Mission peninsulas are predominantly vinifera grape regions. Riesling, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Gewurztraminer, Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc all vie for attention. And the number of wineries in the area has increased from an original five to over sixteen and continues to grow.

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