

# Wine trails help to grow area tourism and strengthen wine region

BY REGGIE ONTARIO

What northern Michigan tourist destination was written about over 200 times last year in local, regional and Midwestern publications—more than any other area destination? Which brochures are among the most requested at the Traverse City Convention & Visitors Bureau? What is among the most requested destinations that the West Michigan Tourist Association receives daily?

Northern Michigan Wineries.

Wine trail associations have been a popular way for wineries to promote themselves in California, Australia, and New York. Michigan, one of the fastest growing wine regions in the country, has now joined other world-class wine regions by developing four wine trail associations: Wineries of the Old Mission Peninsula, The Leelanau Peninsula Vintners Association, The Southwest Michigan Wine Trail and

the Southeast Michigan Wine Trail.

The Wineries of Old Mission Peninsula (WOMP), while just forming an official legal entity, have been organizing joint promotional events for several years. Their annual Blossom Days has been a popular event, where visitors buy a special tasting glass and taste two-barrel samples at each of the four wineries on the Old Mission Peninsula.

"In developing our trail we are marketing ourselves in a way to build brand recognition," said Liz Berger, of Chateau Chantal and President of the trail. "When people say Old Mission we want them to think wine, like when someone says Napa, wine immediately comes to mind. There are certain things that we can do to market our region collectively while still maintaining our autonomy as individual wineries on the peninsula."

Many share Berger's view of wine trails. In California a recent wine glut

has brought many wineries together that in the past were not a part of a collective trail, to promote "local" wines.

Don Coe, managing partner of Black Star Farms, agrees with that concept. Coe played a pivotal role in helping to develop the Leelanau Peninsula Vintners Association (LPVA).

"When you are in Germany or Italy or California you should drink the local wines," said Coe. "Essentially that is what we are trying to do with our trail on the Leelanau Peninsula, we want visitors to the area to buy and drink our local wines. There is another important component to this and that is having the local residents supporting what we are doing. We want them to look in their own backyard first for wine. We believe that they will be pleasantly surprised by the quality of wines that exist here."

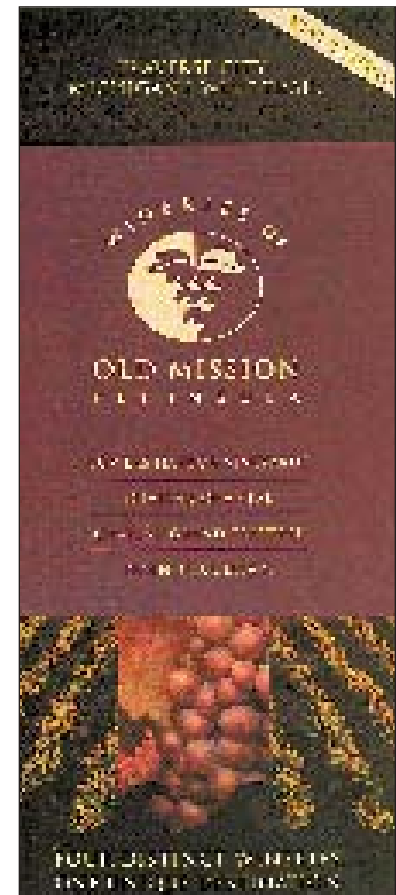
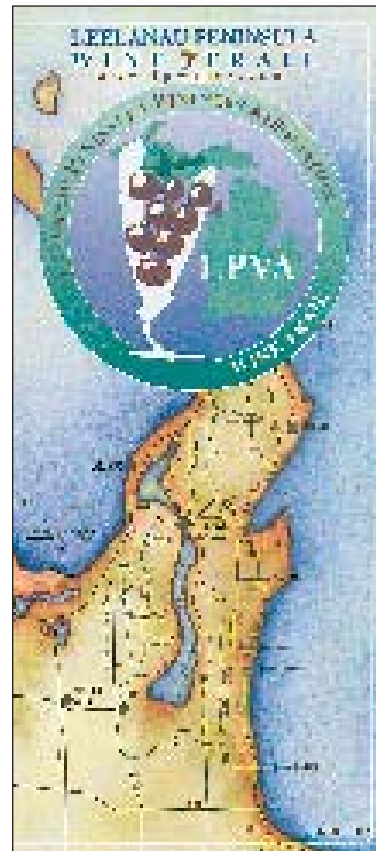
Touring wineries has become big business. A recent study by Michigan State University has documented that Michigan Wine Tourism is on the rise. Area and regional tourism associations have seen a lot of interest in wine touring requests in recent years.

"Wineries and lighthouses are our two most requested destinations," said Dianna Stampfer, Marketing & Media Director with West Michigan Tourist Association.

The Traverse City Convention & Visitors Bureau has found similar results with callers and visitors to their tourist center.

"Certain times during the year about one in three calls or visitors to our

Take in a wine trail tour along both the Leelanau and Old Mission Peninsulas whether you're a visiting or a local guest of the area's wineries.



center are looking for wine trail information," said Kathy McCafferty of the Visitor Center. "At times we can't even keep the wine trail maps in."

Both peninsula wine trails produce an annual wine trail map. Visitors and residents alike use maps to visit the 10 wineries of the LPVA and the four wineries of the WOMP.

Another important aspect of a successful wine trail is hosting special wine tasting events. Old Mission holds two events annually. Their Blossom Days was started in 1994 to create awareness of the four wineries on the peninsula and to celebrate the beauty of the blossoms.

Two years ago the group came up with the idea of combining two age-old favorites.

"We know that there are a lot of chili cook-offs but there are not very many mac & cheese competitions. So we started one," said Spencer Stegenga of Bowers Harbor Vineyard. "We have eight different recipes prepared by various restaurants from the area and participants get a glass and get to pair up the mac with our wines."

The Leelanau Peninsula Vintners Association was the first official wine

trail to form in Michigan, and it began in 2000. The LPVA organizes four wine trail events annually. In September the group hosts the Harvest Stompede, a run and walk through the vineyards along with gourmet pasta and a special wine pairing at each winery (see article).

Toast the Season in November celebrates the coming holidays. Each participant receives one locally made grapevine wreath, an ornament at each of the 10 wineries, a commemorative logo wine glass and a special wine pour at each winery, paired with a gourmet holiday food item.

In February the group hosts Taste the Passion that features a snowshoe run or walk through the vineyards and a chocolate and wine tasting experience afterwards. In May the Spring Sip & Savor features new release wines paired with gourmet foods.

"These events have created a lot of awareness for our tasting rooms, said Bonnie Supina, chair of LPVA Trail Events Committee and tasting room manager at Chateau de Leelanau. "We are finding that lot of people are coming back and bringing their friends. We constantly hear that people like the fact that the wineries get a long and promote each other."

Supina is quick to point out that a special event isn't needed to tour the



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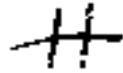
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