

Northern Michigan red wines come into their own

BY CHARLES E. EDSON

Leelanau Peninsula and Old Mission vintners have been producing world-class white wines for years. In fact, the region is known for its outstanding Rieslings, sparkling wines and, more recently, Pinot Grigios. White wine grape varieties like Chardonnay, Auxerrois, Gewurztraminer, Vignoles, and others also grow well in the region and can produce stellar wines.

But red wines? Three years ago British wine writer Tom Stevenson visited northern Michigan in search of sparkling wines. While he found some nice "bubbly," he was quite surprised to find top-notch red wines as well.

"If a decent red wine is possible only one year in ten, how come I found excellent examples from three consecutive vintages: 1997, 1998, and 1999? In addition to great promise found when barrel tasting the 1999's I came across no less than seven of truly world class," Stevenson wrote in *Decanter Magazine*.

Stevenson singled out Bel Lago 1998 Tempesta (a blend of Cabernet franc, Merlot, and other varieties); Black Star Farms 1998 Leorie Vineyards Merlot, 1998 Arcturos Cabernet franc, and 1998 Arcturos Pinot noir; and Leelanau Cellars 1997 Pinot noir and 1997 Meritage all as "world class". Red wines in northern Michigan continue to get better as winemakers and wine-makers hone their skills. Many northern Michigan red wines have garnered gold and silver medals in competition, and some have received favorable reviews in national wine magazines.

The real challenge for winemakers and vintners in this relatively young wine-growing region has been to select red grape varieties that ripen well, survive the cold winters, and have the potential to make excellent wines. A few top candidates are beginning to emerge, among them, Pinot noir and Cabernet franc. Pinot noir is probably the most widely planted red wine grape on Leelanau and Old Mission Peninsulas, with 13 of 16 wineries making Pinot noir.

At its best, Pinot noir evokes spicy, earthy, cherry and black fruit aromas, with hints of toasty oak, vanilla and sometimes even chocolate from the French oak barrels used to age the wines. Underlying the "pretty Pinot aromas" are flavors of surprising depth and complexity, given that most Pinot noirs are relatively light in color compared to reds like Cabernet franc or

Merlot. Food friendly, Pinot noir is a great match for fresh Lake Michigan fish and for red meats, particularly with mushroom sauces. Fresh morels are simply a match made in heaven.

Cabernet franc is another red wine-grape variety making inroads in northern Michigan. Several of the wines touted as "world class" by Tom Stevenson contained Cabernet franc in the blend. Cabernet franc wines, too, continue to evolve as northern Michigan winemakers and winemakers begin to match their success with white wines. Two good examples are the 2001 Ciccone Cabernet franc and the 2001 Chateau Chantel Trio.

Send in the clones

For hundreds of years, Burgundian winegrape growers have carefully watched their vineyards, identifying the vines that produce the finest wine. They then propagate cuttings from those vines to expand their plantings. These "clones" have provided the basis for the "Grand Cru" vineyards of Burgundy that produce the finest and most expensive (often \$100 or more per bottle) wines of the region. The Burgundians claim that several clones should be used to make the best Pinot noir, those wines with the greatest depth and complexity. Each clone brings a slightly different flavor profile and structure to the wine.

About 18 years ago, Oregon State University imported these elite clones to help Oregon winemakers improve their wines and to compete on the world stage. These clones are called "Dijon" clones and are identified by number, like "Dijon 115" or "Dijon 777". Sixteen years ago, Bel Lago Vineyards was the first in Michigan to import the new Dijon clones from Oregon. Today the vineyard is evaluating over 30 clones of Pinot noir, in search for the very best group of clones for northern Michigan.

The best clones to date are indeed the Dijon series. Other clones can add 'spice' to a blend, broadening the flavors and appeal of the wine. You can taste the differences even in the vineyard, as the grapes near ripeness. The Dijon clones seem to have a broader flavor profile earlier, with other clones favoring pretty, fruit flavors.

Bel Lago, Black Star Farms, Shady Lane Cellars, and Willow Vineyards have all used Dijon clones in their Pinot noirs, and it is reflected in the quality of the Pinot noir from these wineries. Most other northern

Michigan wineries have also planted Dijon or other select clones, and these selections will surely be a factor in the evolution of Pinot noir on Leelanau Peninsula and Old Mission Peninsula.

Tasting northern Michigan reds

Give the following Leelanau Peninsula reds a try: Bel Lago: Pinot noir, Tempesta; Boskydel: DeChaunac (perhaps the best example of this variety anywhere); Chateau Fontaine: Pinot noir Chateau de Leelanau: Cabernet franc Ciccone Vineyards: Cabernet Franc, Dolcetto Good Harbor Vineyards: Pinot noir, Harbor Red Leelanau Cellars: Meritage L. Mawby: Sparkling rose Raftshol Vineyards: Cabernet franc, Meritage (Raftshol has a real focus on reds) Shady Lane: Pinot noir Willow Vineyards: Pinot noir Winery at Black Star Farms: Pinot noir, Merlot.

Give the following Old Mission Peninsula reds a try: Chateau Chantel:



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Pinot noir, Trio Chateau Grand Traverse: Merlot, Pinot noir Bowers Harbor Vineyards: Bowers Harbor Red Peninsula Cellars: Pinot noir,

Cabernet Merlot.
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