

Local wine trails celebrate five years

Destination wine helps grow tourism

BY REGGIE ONTARIO

What northern Michigan tourist destination was written about over 300 times last year in local, regional and Midwestern publications, more than any other area destination? What brochures are among the most requested at the Traverse City Convention & Visitors Bureau? What are among the most popular destinations that the West Michigan Tourist Association receives daily requests for information?

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.

Locally, the wineries on Old Mission and Leelanau Peninsula started their wine trails in 2000 with help from grants from the Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council. Both Trails modeled themselves after successful trails in California and New York.

The Wineries of Old Mission Peninsula (WOMP) have been organizing joint promotional events for several years before official forming their wine trail. 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. When people say Old Mission we want them to think wine, like when someone says Napa, wine immediately



tively while still maintaining our autonomy as individual wineries on the Peninsula."

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," Coe said. "Essentially that is what we are trying to do with our trail on the Leelanau Peninsula. We want area visitors 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

comes to mind," said Liz Berger, of Chateau Chantal and President of the trail. "I think there are certain things that we can do to market our region collec-

tively while still maintaining our autonomy as individual wineries on the Peninsula."

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 Stampfler, President of Promote Michigan. "My company receives more requests from travel writers interested in the northern Michigan wineries then any other destination."

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 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 12 wineries of the LPVA and the five 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 wineries on the peninsula and to celebrate the beauty of the blossoms.

Four years ago the group came up with another 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

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