



Grape Days of autumn

Like it or not, Mother Nature's role is done. Now it's time for winemakers to step in and finish the job, participants welcome. BY TAI ALEXANDER

WHILE ONLY 2,000 of Michigan's 14,600 acres of vineyards are devoted to wine grapes, they hold more than 50 varieties. From bone-dry to ultra-sweet ice varieties, a full range of white, rose, red and sparkling wines are being crafted in the Great Lakes State.

European varieties (Riesling, Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio, Gewurztraminer, Pinot Blanc, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Pinot Noir) grow best along Lake Michigan's shores, where the "lake effect" moderates the temperature and provides ideal conditions.

French/American hybrids (Vignoles, Vidal Blanc, Traminette, Seyval Blanc and others) are crosses between European and Native American varieties, thus more resistant to disease and cold.

About 45 percent of Michi-

gan's wine grapes are grown in the southwest quadrant's Lake Michigan Shore and Fennville appellations (two of four federally-recognized growing regions). With a growing season of about 160 days, harvest here begins the end of August for early hybrid varieties.

Traverse City boasts two distinct ap-

pellations. Both the Leelanau Peninsula and Old Mission Peninsula lie along the 45th Parallel, which also stretches through some of Europe's most famed growing regions. Up north, the growing season lasts about 145 days, with harvest for late-ripening vinifera extending into November.

Following is a sampling of how to experience the fruitful season, hands-on.

Leelanau Peninsula

A premier event in the Midwest, Harvest Stompede on Sept. 10-11 guides both competitive and recreational runners (and walkers) along a winding course that traverses through the rolling vineyard landscape. Post-race events include self-guided winery tasting tours at 18 area wineries (www.lpwines.com) and a sampling of local foods.

Visitors to Leelanau can also savor holiday-themed gourmet food paired with a special wine pour at the peninsula's tasting rooms during "Toast the Season" on Nov. 5-6 and 12-13.

Old Mission Peninsula

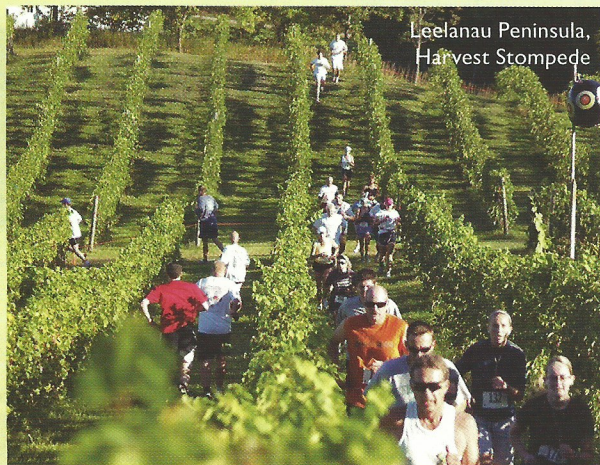
While the Wineries of Old Mission Peninsula (www.wineriesofoldmission.com) pair their Rieslings, Pinot Grigios, Chardonnays and more with gourmet versions of a classic comfort food prepared by local chefs during the Great Macaroni & Cheese Bake-Off on Nov. 26, Bowers Harbor Vineyards and The Boathouse Restaurant offer "Dining in the Vines" Saturdays in September, and Chateau Chantal Winery hosts its annual Harvest Fest on Oct. 1.

"Everyone enjoys stomping grapes, Lucy-style," says Marie-Chantal Dales, for whom the winery is named.

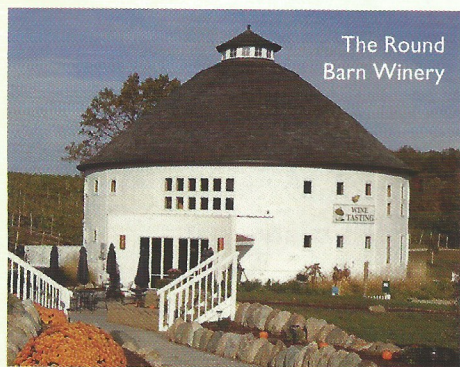
Lake Michigan Shore

Travel via wagon through Fenn Valley Vineyards in Fennville (www.fennvalley.com) through October's third weekend. "Guests can taste the grapes from each vineyard, then sample the wine that came from those grapes," said owner/vintner Doug Welsch.

During an annual two-day "Winemaking Experience," participants can also unleash their inner vintners at The Round Barn Winery in Baroda (www.roundbarnwinery.com). Spend the day pick-



tasting room



The Round
Barn Winery

ing, crushing, de-stemming and pressing grapes that will age throughout winter into your own wine vintage. Then, return in the spring to tweak and fill at least 24 custom-labeled bottles. White winemaking: Oct. 1 and 2; red, Oct. 15 and 16.

Pioneer Wine Trail

Spend Nov. 5 in a tasteful way on The Big Grape Bus Tour along the Pioneer Wine Trail (www.pioneerwinetrail.com). Visitors at each of the five participating wineries will sample signature wines paired with tasty small plates. Following the tour, gather at the Eagle Crest Marriott in nearby Ypsilanti for an exceptional five-course wine dinner.



For more autumn adventures, visit www.MichiganWines.com. Tai Alexander is a West Michigan-based freelance writer.

Harvest wine pairings

Squash, pumpkins and other gourd-style vegetables: If sweetened, a semi-dry or even sweeter Riesling or Gewurztraminer; if savory, try Chardonnay or Pinot Gris.

Wild game: Needs a hearty red to stand up to the gaminess, like Cab Sauvignon (including blends Meritage, Cab/Merlot) or Cab Franc.

Turkey: Roasted the traditional way, pair with an off-dry Gewurztraminer, Traminette or Riesling.

Stuffing: Chardonnay with chestnut stuffing. A traditional herb stuffing might be better with Pinot Gris or Pinot Blanc. Pair milder-flavored sausage stuffing with Pinot Noir or Merlot; for a spicier side dish, try Cab Franc or a Meritage blend.

Braised Lamb Shanks, Venison Chops or Beef Tenderloin: Pair with a Cabernet or Merlot.

Roast Pork: Pinot Gris or buttery Chardonnay, or Pinot Noir will pair nicely.

Ham: If basting with a sweet, pineapple glaze, try something with tropical fruit notes like a semi-dry Riesling. If the meat is more savory and salty, pair with Pinot Noir.

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