

Uncorking Michigan's Best Kept Secret

By Dianne Stampfer

Photo courtesy of Fenn Valley

Wine production in Michigan dates back to the 1880s, but it's only been in recent years that the industry has come to fruition. Now, with close to 40 wineries in four distinct American Viticultural (AVA) regions, the wine industry is flourishing in Michigan.

"Michigan wines are typically "cool climate" – clean, crisp, balanced wines that exhibit real varietal character," according to reports from the Michigan Grape & Wine Industry Council in Lansing. "Most of Michigan's quality wine grapes grow within 25 miles of Lake Michigan. Here, the 'lake effect' protects the vines with snow in winter, retards bud break in spring helping avoid frost damage and extends the growing season by up to four weeks."

The southwest corner of Michigan, from the state line north to Saugatuck and as far east as Paw Paw, is classified as "Lake Michigan Shore." With beach-like soils and lake-effect climate, this region's rolling hills and countryside produces over 10,000 acres of grapes, which are turned into a variety of award-winning wines. More than 45 percent of Michigan's wine grapes are grown in this appellation.

Fenn Valley Vineyards

Trained as a high school biology and chemistry teacher, Doug Welsch was making homemade wine long before he moved to Fennville from Illinois in the 1970s. He and his father, Bill Welsch, planned and planted the current 50

acres of vineyards from raw farmland, on a 230 acre farm five miles from Lake Michigan.

"Unlike farmers who already own farm land and then begin to grow grapes, our family migrated from the Chicago area and were therefore free to select the most desirable site," Welsch said. "Our vineyards are located on the top of a large sand ridge that extends inland from Lake Michigan between the Black River and the Kalamazoo River valleys."

The professions of educator and wine maker blend well for Welsch, who lectures at regional and national industry conferences, with topics ranging from basic winemaking techniques to innovate methods of marketing to tapping the tourist niche. Over the years, he has also worked closely with researchers from Michigan State University to develop the quality progression of premium Michigan wine grapes.

Welsch has also been instrumental in bringing new grape varieties to the area, including the Chardonnay – a Chardonnay cross developed at Cornell University. More than 15 varieties of grapes are grown on the Fenn Valley estate, including Riesling, Vidal and Pinot Noir.

Round Barn Winery & Distillery

Singling out one distinct feature about Round Barn Winery & Distillery in Baroda is next to impossible. They make wine. They make beer. They make brandy and other spirits. They have a B&B and an Amish round barn, which dates to

1911. Round Barn is owned and operated by the Moersch family, including Richard and Sherrre and their sons, Matt (the winemaker) and Chris (the marketer).

"Select, hand-crafted wines are Matt's hallmark. He maintains strict quality standards with his hands-on approach and commitment to old world standards," said Chris. "The variety of wines is virtually unrivaled in North America. Under Matt's scrupulous supervision, the intricate cultivation of each grape variety flourishes in wines reminiscent of their European counterparts."

The Round Barn Distillery uses a copper pot still, housed in the lower level of the barn, to make high proof (140) fruit brandies and cordials, with no artificial flavors, chemicals or random elements of gold. What is produced is "liquid essences of fruit."

You too can learn this culinary art, through a series of classes. Participants pick the grapes, crush and press them and with Matt's guidance, handcraft two cases of wine. Classes are held for both red and white wines, as well as for spirits, such as brandy.

The newest beverage to be produced at Round Barn is a line of micro-breeds such as Chiron-amber ale, Kuiper Belt-summer wheat ale and Solar Wind-pilsner.

"We have been working with one of our local brewers to help us speed up the learning curve required to produce top quality beers," Chris said. "Throughout the year, our list of beers will change to include several seasonal selections."

Tabor Hill Winery

The vineyard at Tabor Hill in Buchanan was established in 1968 and today features an award-winning winery, tasting room and restaurant. From the vineyard tour to the tasting room to the dining room, you'll find Tabor Hill offers an experience like no other.

A casual walking tour takes you along the vineyard, through rows of oaken casks that hold the aging wine. During your tour, you'll have the chance to watch a video, which describes the wine making process in such detail that you'll feel like the winemaker.

After the tour, it's time to stop by the tasting room to sample what has become a labor of love for winemaker Mike Merchant. With 70 acres in production and 100,000 gallons of wine being made each year, he is quite busy.

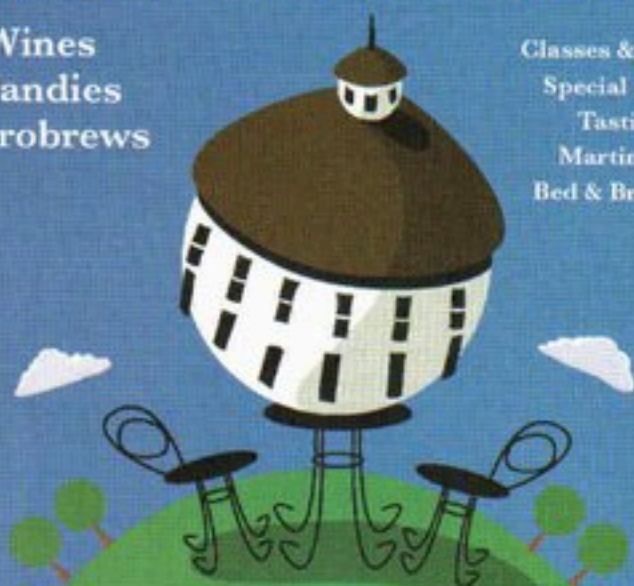
A complete selection of dry, semi-dry, sparkling wines, fruit wines and non-alcoholic juices are available at here. The Classic Demi-Sec, Tabor Hill's first wine, has been celebrated in the White House by many presidents and continues to lead in wine sales from the state of Michigan.

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the round barn winery

Wines
Brandies
Microbrews

Classes & Dinners
Special Events
Tastings
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at Heart of the Vineyard

10963 Hills Road • Baroda, Michigan • 800-716-WINE
For more information visit: www.RoundBarnWinery.com

The tastes of



Tabor Hill

Winery & Restaurant



Lunch & dinner served Wednesday - Sunday. Reservations strongly recommended.

Tasting rooms in
Ann Arbor • Bridgman • Saugatuck

185 Mt. Tabor Rd • Buchanan, MI
(800) 263-3363 • taborhill.com

The American Pinot Gris is a new release for Tabor Hill, featuring a bouquet of honeydew melon. The American Merlot is estate bottled and aged in premium oak, with a velvety richness that slowly unfolds, revealing hints of black cherry, vanilla and a slightly spicy finish.

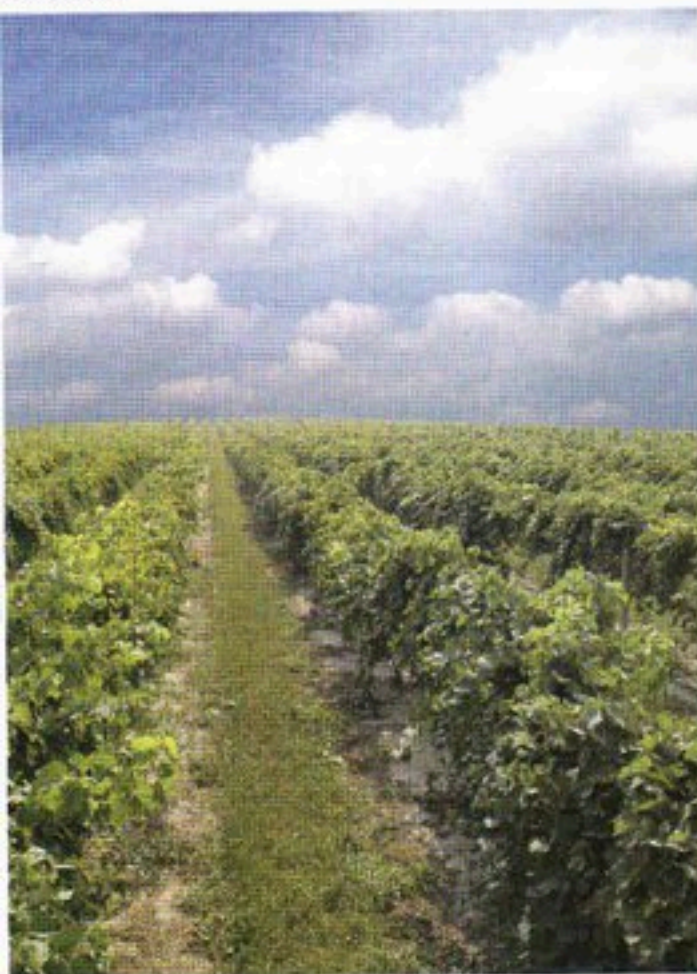
After sampling the fine selection of wines, you may feel the need to pair them up with a delicious meal. Acclaimed chef and cuisine educator Patsy Wyman prepares a wide array of culinary masterpieces in her kitchen each day. The recently expanded restaurant, offers spectacular views of the vineyards. Outside seating is also available, weather permitting.

Warner Vineyards

Established in the 1930s, Warner Vineyards in Paw Paw is the second-oldest winery in the state of Michigan and is now run by a third generation of Warners.

The Wine Haus at Warner Vineyards offers tastings of 22 wine and champagne varieties and is open year round, seven days a week. Warner is considered a boutique winery, with an annual production of less than 5,000 cases.

Among the most frequently purchased wines are the Liebestrauben (semi-sweet white) and Ruby Red (semi-sweet red). The newest release is the Peach & Honey, a blend of peaches, honey, apricots, cinnamon and white wine. With 13.5% residual sugar, it is a thicker, semi-sweet selection.



A view of the vineyard at Fenn Valley.



The new dining room at Tabor Hill.



The wine tasting room at Fenn Valley.

Those looking for the sweetest of the sweet will enjoy Warner's 2002 Ice Wine, with 24.3% residual sugar. This extremely limited edition wine has rich, lush, opulent flavors reminiscent of the great and much more expensive French Sauternes. Warner's ice wine tops out at \$74.99 a bottle, but is well worth the investment.

Located on the property is Paw Paw's historic 1890 Waterworks building, a registered Michigan Historic Site. The Warner family purchased it in 1967. Using lumber from old wine casks and period materials, they remodeled the station as a tourist and education center. Today, the building houses the Waterworks Station Café, offering an intimate setting for a delicious lunch and dinner, with an adjacent outdoor deck that is open May through October.

Dianna Stampfer is the president of Promote Michigan (www.PromoteMichigan.com) and is an active supporter of the Michigan wine industry.