

Defining “Pure” Michigan Wine

By Dianna Stampfler

Some people read food labels for health reasons, I read wine labels for loyalty reasons. More specifically, Michigan wine labels. As the president of Promote Michigan, I feel it is my obligation to walk the walk and talk the talk...and to sip the local wine!

How much wine are we talking about? Each year, Michigan's 140 or so commercial wineries produce three million gallons of wine for consumers (myself included). The source of the grapes or fruit (as there are many other types of wine such as blueberry, apple, pear, peach, etc.) is the determining factor on how each wine is identified and labeled.

Situated within the Great Lakes region, Michigan is a prime location for growing a variety of grapes primarily within five federally-recognized American Viticultural Areas (AVA) – “a designated wine grape-growing region in the United States distinguishable by geographic features, with boundaries defined by the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) of the United States Department of the Treasury.”

Michigan's AVA regions are among more than 230 nationally and include:

- 1) Fennville AVA (Established in 1981)
- 2) Leelanau Peninsula AVA (Established in 1982)
- 3) Lake Michigan Shore AVA (Established in 1983, Amended in 1987)
- 4) Old Mission Peninsula AVA (Established in 1987)
- 5) Tip of the Mitt AVA (Established in 2016)

In addition to defining the geographic boundaries for grape growing, regulations regarding production and labeling are also imposed within the AVA. Once established, at least 85 percent of the grapes used to make a wine within that region must be grown in the specified area if the AVA is to be referenced on the label. Typically, wines bottled under the AVA designation fall within the \$20 to \$35 price point at the winery or in retail stores (of course, prices are higher at restaurants).

A wine denoted with “Michigan” on the label means that at least

75 percent of the grapes used are from within the state – although that can be purchased from multiple sources and areas. By not listing “Michigan” on the front of the label (and why wouldn't you, if you could), someone who knows how to decipher the language might assume the grapes are not from within the state. These “Michigan” wines are often sold for \$12 to \$20 a bottle, with many stores (like Meijer, D&W, Family Fare and Kroger) offering regular sales to bring prices down by as much as \$5 a bottle.

If the label reads “American,” it means the fruit or juice was sourced from around the United States (from one or multiple sources). These wines are often produced quickly and are sold in higher volume for less than \$10 a bottle (often on par with nationally-known brands such as Sutter Home, Yellow Tail, Barefoot and such).

On the flip side, wines identified as “Estate” are as localized as they can be, often produced in smaller quantities and garnering higher prices because all the grapes were grown on site at the winery. As a general rule, “Estate” wines are more expensive based on the simple principles of supply and demand. These wines are often priced at \$40 or higher, depending on the total number of cases produced in any given year.

One other distinction would be “Reserve” wines, which are typically smaller quantities from a specific top-shelf vintage which has been held back and cellared longer. Depending on the year and quality, these wines (which can also be “Estate,” making them even more exclusive) often go for a higher prices as well.

THE QUALITY DIFFERENCE

With all these designations, the price of the wine isn't the only change – the quality of the wine itself is distinctly different. More time and attention is put into an “Estate” wine versus an

Map graphic courtesy of Michigan Craft Beverage Council

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“American” wine, and rightfully so. Much like luxury cars, designer clothes and custom-built houses are more expensive than those which are mass produced.

In my early wine-drinking days, before I knew how to read labels and when I couldn't afford wine over \$10, I often purchased “American” wines made by Michigan wineries. I imagine others find themselves in this place, where their palate and their purse aren't quite ready for the higher-tiered wines. This makes these wines more approachable on multiple levels to new consumers who still want to keep their dollars as local as possible.

Today, my budget as well as my drinking habits have improved immensely, meaning I gravitate toward AVA wines, although I will also drink “Michigan” wines (which are often found on restaurant wine lists*) and sometimes treat myself (or others) to “Estate” or “Reserve” wines for special occasions.

Some Michigan wineries have cultivated production strategies which allow them to release wines across the board in all categories, which is brilliant if you think about it. They're able to appeal to the introductory wine drinker with a limited budget

as well as drinkers all along the spectrum, right up to those high-end “Estate” wines.

One example of this is [Chateau Grand Traverse](#) on the Old Mission Peninsula in Traverse City, the longest-operating commercial winery in northern Michigan dating back to 1974. Their “Grand Traverse Select” Brand Riesling is the sweet “American” wine that I cut my teeth on. I was able to pick it up for about \$8 a bottle at the local grocery store, and I always had a bottle chilling in my refrigerator.

In talking with Eddie O'Keefe, President of Chateau Grand Traverse, I did recently learn that while they do source a majority of their juice for their Grand Traverse Select Brand wines primarily from

growers in Washington State, it isn't as simple as buying a commodity bulk wine on the open market.

“We've been working with various growers in Washington state for more than 20 years,” he says. “My winemaker and I visit and talk regularly with growers and stipulate the style of fruit we want grown. Then, just before the harvest, they periodically ship us representative sample clusters of grapes for us to determine the quality and harvest time. After harvesting, they immediately press the grapes, chill the juice to 38 degrees and allow it to cold settle before sending it via an expedited tanker truck to us in Michigan – something that takes about three days. Then we can begin the fermentation and winemaking process in our winery.”

O'Keefe also said that there are years when they blend as much as 40 percent of their Michigan grown fruit into their Grand Traverse Select Brand wines, based on the availability of grapes and wine style desired. With their approximate 200 acres of vineyards on the Old Mission Peninsula, they have a nice variety from which to choose.

When I outgrew their Select wines, I moved onto their “Late

Harvest Riesling” with its “Michigan” designation, before I advanced to the semi-dry and dry Rieslings bottled on Old Mission Peninsula, and ultimately many of their other wines including the Gamay Noir – which is one of my favorites (and one of only a handful of such wines made from this grape in the state).

According to their website, “Gamay Noir has adapted well to the climate of Northern Michigan, producing a lighter-bodied, aromatic, fruity red wine with distinct tart cherry, red plum and black pepper flavors. With four months of barrel aging, it is lighter than traditional red wines making a versatile wine for cheese and breads, grilled salmon, roasted duckling or wild mushroom pizza.”

Now, there are times when the winemaker’s hands are tied when it comes to sourcing grapes – which is what happened with many local wineries in the mid-1990s when local fruit was hard to come by. Unlike other craft beverage producers in Michigan, wine is dependent on Mother Nature. Some years, the summer season creates the ideal growing conditions for wine – days with plenty of sunshine, just enough rainfall and limited damaging storms. But, one “bad weather day” in the vineyard – frost, hail, wind and such – can literally change the future of the grapes and ultimately the wine. Despite the winemaker’s best attempt to use only locally grown fruit, whether that is from their estate or AVA, there are instances when they are forced to use fruit or juice from outside their region or state to actually have something to sell consumers.

“In Michigan, making wine from locally grown grapes is not only an art, it’s a testament to the determination and resilience of the creative hands that craft it,” says Karel Bush, executive director of the Michigan Craft Beverage Council (formerly Michigan Grape & Wine Industry Council), a division of the Michigan Department of Agriculture & Rural Development. “Conditions can vary dramatically from one year to the next, and winemakers need to be able to adjust their practices to accommodate. Those who make estate-grown wines are especially vulnerable. Generally, estate wines are produced in smaller amounts, and if they lose some of their crop – whatever the reason – they might be forced to purchase grapes or juice from elsewhere to have enough wine just to keep their doors open.”

And those collective doors see a lot of visitors each year. In fact, Michigan wineries welcome more than 1.7 million visitors each year with a combined spending of more than \$252 million. That’s a significant contribution for two of the state’s top industries: agriculture, #2 at \$102 billion a year and tourism (Pure Michigan), #3 at \$22 billion annually. The wine industry overall is responsible for more than \$5.4 billion in economic impact with more than \$853 million in taxes and \$774 million in direct wages for over 47,000 people working in various sectors of the industry.

There are more than 13,700 acres of vineyards in Michigan, ranking fourth in the country as a grape-growing state. Yet, most of this is devoted to juice grapes such as Niagara and Concord. Just over 3,000 acres are dedicated to wine grapes and the bulk of those are within 25 miles of Lake Michigan where the “Lake Effect” protects the vines with snow in winter and extends the growing season by as much as four weeks in the late summer and into fall.

TRANSPARENCY IS KEY

Ten years ago, harvest shortfalls – coupled with increased demand from consumers – led some wineries to buy grapes or even pre-made wines from outside the state to supplement their annual production. Doing so is perfectly legal, but wineries must be transparent in their packaging. They are also subjected to federal audits to show records of where grapes are purchased from and how they are used, to make sure they’re adhering to label requirements.



Photos courtesy of Chateau Grand Traverse

Of course, consumers must want to know where their wine comes from and ultimately must know how to read labels if they're to keep this all straight.

For the past few years, I've been speaking to beverage students in the hospitality department at Ferris State University in Big Rapids to educate them about Michigan's craft beverages — including how to identify where products are made. While distilled spirits take up a bulk of my presentation, I do share examples of wine labels with the “American,” “Michigan,” AVA and “Estate” designations (specifically Chateau Grand Traverse, as mentioned above). Educating the upcoming generation of servers, restaurant owners and event planners is as key as enlightening the current bartenders and customers sitting next to me (although they also receive my lesson, whether they want it or not).

One of the most interesting “training sessions” I offered was quite a spur-of-the-moment when I was at the Governor's House in Lansing for a holiday party during Jennifer Granholm's term in office. I stepped up to the bar and noticed a fine selection of Michigan craft beer alongside a couple bottles of wine from one of those make-your-own wine shops operating in the state. I informed the bartender that what she was serving wasn't actually Michigan wine, but an “imposter” made by a company within the state's boundaries with fruit from likely the west coast. She seemed intrigued by this newfound knowledge and to prove a point, I ordered a diet Coke (something I often did when Michigan wine isn't an option).

The funny part of the story is that while I was talking with this woman about how to read wine labels, the governor walked by and overheard our conversation. She stood there for a few minutes, asking questions and admitting she was surprised to learn the wine they had purchased was not actually “Michigan” wine.

Now, to say I ONLY drink Michigan wines would be a blatant lie, but I do consume my fair share both at home and while I'm out and about. Years ago, during one of my “Only Michigan” campaigns, one of my winemaker friends from Traverse City gave me “permission” to indulge in wines from throughout the United States and the world.

Wines reflect the region in which they grapes are grown and the wine is made. Their terroir comes through, giving each a distinctive flavor profile. In Michigan, Riesling is a top varietal but there's a growing portfolio of other vinifera varieties such as Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc and even hybrids such as Marquette. So, in order to enjoy certain varieties, you must draw from the regions where those grapes thrive. Additionally, said my winemaker friend, how do you know how well Michigan wines stand up unless you're also familiar with how their counterparts in the Pacific Northwest, Europe or Finger Lakes Region compare.

The bottom line...to just drink Michigan wine would be limiting myself and halt ongoing learning opportunities about the overall world of vinology. So, as a student of the craft, I must sip and sample wines from all regions of the globe. But, my heart will remain forever tied to those wines from right here at home.

*Visit MichiganWines.com for a list of restaurants around the state that serve Michigan wines.

Dianna Stampfler is the president of *Promote Michigan*. She lives in Walloon Lake, where she enjoys sipping Michigan wine in all four seasons of the year.

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