

# Centennial Celebration

St. Julian Winery plays key role in the success of Michigan's wine industry

By Dianna Stampfler

**I**talian-born Mariano Meconi was destined to be a vintner, planting a legacy that has been rooted in west Michigan for four generations. This year, the business he founded — which later became St. Julian Winery — celebrates its 100th anniversary.

Meconi immigrated to Windsor, Canada, as a teenager. In 1921, at age 26, he launched Border City Wine Cellars (re-named The Meconi Wine Co.). He later turned his ambitions to Detroit (1934) and ultimately to Paw Paw (1936) in southwest Michigan.

This fruit belt region was already ripe with a handful of grape-growers and wineries, most now long gone. Within a couple of years, the Michigan Wine Institute was founded to represent the industry's collective and growing interests by hosting what has evolved into the annual Wine & Harvest Festival in Paw Paw. This year's event is slated for Sept. 10-12, depending on COVID-19 restrictions.

Mariano and his wife, Avelia, raised their children and grew the family business into The Italian Wine Co., which in 1941 became St. Julian Winery (named

after the patron saint of Faleria, Italy, Meconi's birth village). Over time, the Meconi children — Robert, Julia (along with her husband, Apollo "Paul" Braganini), and Eugene — each contributed to the winery in their own respective ways.

Inspired by his grandfather and his mother (Julia), a young David Braganini stepped into the family business after graduating from college in 1973. Controlling interest of the winery transitioned to the Braganini family 10 years later, and David was named president. Under his management, St. Julian became the



foundation on which Michigan's current wine industry took shape.

The Lake Michigan Shore, an American Viticultural Area (AVA), was established in 1983, although local vineyards have been part of the rural landscape in the region since the 1860s. To tap into a growing interest in winery tourism, Braganini and his fellow winemakers founded the Lake Michigan Shore Wine Trail in 2001. It now features nearly 20 wineries and tasting rooms within a five-county area.

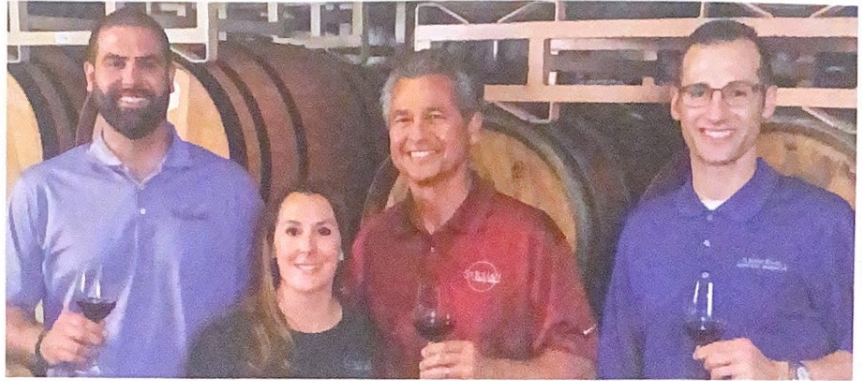
In 2002, St. Julian made history by hiring the first female winemaker in Michigan. Nancie (Corum) Oxley began as a lab manager and enologist, and became vice president of winemaking in 2017. She has significantly expanded St. Julian's portfolio, both in terms of quantity and style, racking up more than 200 Best of Class and Double Gold awards from some of the nation's most esteemed competitions.

St. Julian is regarded as Michigan's most award-winning winery, with an array of wines, sparkling juices, ciders, and distilled spirits. It's also the state's oldest craft distillery (operating since the late 1990s).

Following David's death in 2016, his brother, John, was named company president. John's wife, Sarah, works in administration and their sons, Apollo and Dario, serve as vice president of sales and outstate distribution, respectively. John has since acquired controlling ownership and restructured the company for growth and expansion.

St. Julian is a third of the way through a 10-year renovation of its Paw Paw production facility, which will provide the capacity to compete in every aspect of the industry and support growth goals of up to 10 percent annually.

"As we complete this process, we'll continue to advance our direct-to-consumer activities, including our nearly 15,000-member Wine Club; grow our wholesale business; and develop ancillary services such as bulk wine, juice, and private label, and co-pack services for smaller wineries wanting to expand their offerings," John Braganini says.



In addition to its St. Julian, Braganini Reserve, and Coastline brands, the company is expanding distribution of its Forbidden Fruits Ciders and distilled spirits. John and Sarah Braganini also own and operate the winery's Mountain Road estate vineyard in Coloma, where seven vinifera varieties are grown for small, premium-batch offerings.

St. Julian produced more than 800,000 gallons of its own products in 2020. They're available at independent, convenience, and chain stores, plus larger accounts throughout Michigan and five other states. The company operates tasting rooms in Paw Paw, Dundee, Frankenthum, Troy, Rockford, and Union Pier.

In honor of its centennial, St. Julian is releasing six limited editions of its 2019 Cabernet Sauvignon, each displaying matching commemorative black labels. Just 20 cases of each will be available this fall at its tasting rooms (\$100 per bottle). One-hundred wooden boxed sets of all six wines (\$499) can be purchased at a special ticketed Centennial Release Experience in

**This page, clockwise from top:**

The Braganini family; founder Mariano Meconi; and a beautiful St. Julian vineyard.

**Opposite page:** The fruits of their labors.

the Apollo Room in Paw Paw.

The event will feature presentations by the winemakers about the use of barrels in the aging process and how different cooperages impart the distinct flavor profiles evident in this wine series. Guests can meet the Braganini family and help them celebrate the past 100 years, while getting a firsthand look at their impressive future plans.

Special pairing dinners, tastings at the Mountain Road vineyard, and events in the new barrel cellar are in the works for later this year. ☞

#### PLAN IT!

St. Julian Winery  
[stjullan.com](http://stjullan.com)