

Travel



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O&E Thursday, February 23, 1984

Wine country

State wineries draw many tourists

There are any number of points of interest within a few hours drive of the metropolitan area for vacationers looking for an off-beat excursion.

How about a trip to a Michigan winery?

Wine grapes? Here in southwestern Michigan's cold climate? Yes, even though winters are cold here. Harm J. de Blij, author of a new book on the geography of wine, remembers standing in a snow-covered vineyard here, the temperature 8 degrees above zero. Local winery officials say that temperatures dip to 20 below zero at least once or twice a winter.

Such weather would kill most varieties of vinifera vines, whose grapes make the best French wines. But vineyards here plant hybrids that combine French taste qualities with the hardiness of America vines.

"They're bred to be almost ideally suited to this climate," says David Braganini, president of the St. Julian Winery. "There are dozens and dozens of hybrid varieties. We work with about a dozen, and we're always experimenting."

Braganini's grandfather, Mariano

Meconi, an immigrant fruit merchant with a surplus supply of grapes, started the Italian Wine Co. in Windsor, Ont., in 1921.

When Prohibition in the United States ended in 1933, he moved to Detroit and, in 1937, to Paw Paw, where grapes were being grown. He changed the winery's name to World War II, and St. Julian is now one of several southwestern Michigan wineries. There are two others here.

BUT WHY southwestern Michigan? The answer lies in a geographical oddity that geographers call a "microclimate."

"The prevailing weather patterns here are from northwest to southeast," says Chas Catherman, 32, the St. Julian winemaker. "That means they come from across Lake Michigan at its widest point. In the spring, the air is chilled as it comes across the lake. We usually have an early thaw, but the lake tempers it so the buds don't think it's spring and open up, only to be damaged by the frost that is almost certain to follow the first nice weather."

"In the fall, the opposite happens. The lake has been warmed over the summer, and the result is that when everyone else is experiencing first frost, we usually have two or three weeks to go before we get ours."

What's more, the region has rolling hillsides and sandy, well-drained soil that enhances the growing of grapes. Grapes have been grown here since the 19th century, but most were Concord grapes, used for grape juice. What was left over was used in making sweet fortified wines that most Americans used to prefer.

Only in the last decade have some Michigan wineries followed the changes in American taste and aimed for higher-quality table wines. The result is that many of the 13,500 acres of vines planted in the 40-mile area east of Lake Michigan, where the microclimate prevails, now produce wine grapes.

THESE INCLUDE Amerigo Marcelletti's six acres of the hybrid seval blanc and a few other varieties. For Marcelletti, whose parents came to this area from Italy and were, he says, "wine acclimated," the change couldn't come soon enough. He had

been experimenting with hybrids as early as the late 1940s.

"We had a Thanksgiving freeze in 1952, and everything else died, not one cluster of grapes survived," he recalls. "But every seval blanc vine survived."

Still, it was a while before he could persuade other growers to switch

form concords, whose vines are easier to train and don't require the thinning that helps improve grape quality. Now the growth of interest in wine has brought an economic boomlet to the area. Signs on Interstate 94 direct visitors to wineries and wine tours, and a three-day wine festival brought nearly 20,000 visitors through Paw

Paw wineries in September.

Almost all Michigan wine is sold within Michigan and surrounding states, and St. Julian officials admit that Michigan wineries are far behind their California and European counterparts. They see that as a challenge to improve their product.



Chas Catherman, winemaker at the St. Julian Winery in Paw Paw, checks a sample of red wine in the aging cellars.

Niagara grapes from an Allegen vineyard tumble into a box with the aid of a mechanical harvester. At the peak of the season the St. Julian Winery takes in 135 tons of grapes a day.

travel notes

The West Bloomfield Parks and Recreation Department is sponsoring its third cruise on the Carnival Cruise Line. The TSS Tropicaire will cruise the Atlantic Ocean coast of Mexico and stop at Puerto Vallarta, Mazatlan and Cabo San Lucas April 22-29.

The trip includes round-trip air

fare to Los Angeles where participants will board the Tropicaire and eight days and seven nights aboard ship.

Cost is \$950 per person, quad occupancy, or \$1,155 per person double occupancy on main deck. Call the parks and recreation department at 334-5660 for information. Reservations may be made up to March 1.

Trip to 2 historic cities

Charleston, Ga. and Savannah, S.C. are the two points of interest on a seven-day trip being arranged by Helen Balmer & Associates of Bloomfield Hills.

The April 25-May 1 package is timed to capture the beauty of the two historic cities at their springtime best.

Charleston is a city that combines a unique architectural heritage and modern facilities. Built on a peninsula between two rivers and fronting on one of the finest harbors in the world, the city has many grand old houses and public buildings in the same style and condi-

tion they were in two centuries ago when they were built.

Charleston is a city which has worked hard to protect and preserve its historic buildings, and they still are used by government, cultural and social organizations.

Savannah is a modern city and the biggest world trade cargo port on the South Atlantic Coast.

The package includes accommodations at the Mills House in Charleston and the Mulberry Inn.

For information, call 646-0040.



An example of Savannah architecture, the Olde Pink House, was constructed in the 1800s.

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