

## Bronte head enjoys fruits of labor



Winemaker Angelo Spinazze samples the nectar.

*"Michigan is one of the best grape growing states in the country . . . the climate's ideal. Good wine grapes have to suffer."*  
— Robert Wozniak, Bronte president



The caps are sealed.

Photographed by Lelani Hu



Bronte president Robert Wozniak runs the operation.

**By ALICE COLLINS**  
Robert Wozniak's life-long love affair with wine and grapes is unmistakable when he speaks about Michigan's expanding wine industry and about the family-controlled Bronte Champagne and Wine Co. that he heads.

The Bronte company was born in Detroit at the end of prohibition, only a few years before its 39-year-old president.

"I love everything about the business," Wozniak said.

Wozniak lives with his wife and four children in Birmingham. He directs the local Bronte office in Ferndale and its vineyards and winery built near Benton Harbor, Mich. in 1950.

"WINE IS MORE than just a drink, it's a food. So many other alcoholic beverages all taste alike. Wines are more interesting . . . fun to compare . . . they have different tastes and aromas," he said.

The domestic wine industry has been growing from the beginning, but "the big boom has been in the last 10 years. Most of our wine drinkers today are young people—from 21 to 49. And as time goes by the age limits keep expanding."

Bronte employs between 40 and 50 persons at both locations, and sells about 100,000 cases of wine a

year, according to its president. The wines retail from \$1.99 to \$3.39 a fifth.

The company's winery and vineyards spread over 200 acres in Keeler, Mich., about 15 miles east of Benton Harbor.

"Our chief wine maker is Angelo Spinazze who came from Conigliano, Italy where his father also made wine. He's been with us 39 years," said Wozniak.

**WHAT DOES** the president consider special accomplishments of Bronte?

"We pioneered and introduced French hybrid grapes in Michigan," said Wozniak. The hybrids are a cross between American grapes and the French baco-noir, and are the basis of our premium variety wines. We introduced them here in 1958.

"Michigan is one of the best grape-growing states in the country—there are seven wineries and two more to come. The climate's ideal. Good wine grapes have to

suffer . . . they have to go through a harsh winter season . . . it's the hardship that gives them the character and acidity necessary for hardy premium wines."

**BRONTE WAS** the first company to put cold duck (a mixture of sparkling burgundy and champagne) into a bottle and sell it.

It was Wozniak's idea, and it caught on. Prior to that, cold duck was mixed and served in restaurants, but never bottled and sold.

"We helped to rejuvenate the Michigan Wine Institute six years ago to promote the industry in the state," he said. Now Wozniak heads that organization as its youngest president.

Wozniak runs three operations—the winery, the vineyards and distribution. Bronte's 35 different wines are sold throughout the midwest . . . "and we're continuing to work for a national and international market."

Wozniak's father, well-known Detroit dentist T. W. Wozniak, was a primary founder of Bronte—the name coming from a German extract company. The family still has controlling interest in the business.

The end of prohibition in 1933 and the founding of the Bronte company, launched the wine industry in Michigan.

Bronte stock was sold to about 300 small investors. It was the tail end of the depression and large amounts of money were hard to get. Most of the original investors or their heirs still own the stock.

Dr. Wozniak, the father, who retired from the presidency in 1972, is now chairman of the board. For many years after founding Bronte he continued to spend half of his time practicing dentistry and the other half running the winery.

"He wanted my brother and me to become dentists, but neither of us did," Robert Wozniak said.

"I began working in the winery when I was about eight years old," he added. "I don't remember when I first tasted wine, but it was before I was 10."

"I've always loved it, and I let my kids have a sip with their dinners . . . so they can develop an understanding and taste for it early."

Wozniak is married to a native Detroit. "I first met my wife (Patricia) when we were 16 . . . she was backing out of her driveway one day and we sort of almost ran into each other." They were married several years later.

"We like athletic endeavors. Skiing has become a family sport. I used to golf a lot, but gave it up because I wanted to do something with my family . . . so we could spend the time together."

Wozniak also sails and plays tennis. He has a bachelor of science degree in business and a masters degree in advertising and communications from the University of Michigan.

"I attended Detroit Country Day School, but I couldn't afford to send my kids there today," he laughed.

Wozniak said he considered other careers but prepared himself for the wine business.

"I'm not sure if I want to encourage my kids to go into the business or not . . . I'm going to let it be up to them . . . they have to make up their own decisions."

Wozniak has an older brother, Dick, who is a director of the firm, but works for ABC Television, representing its sales in this area. He lives in Franklin Village.

"This year had an excellent grape growing season. In fact, we're planning to introduce a vintage Baco-Noir for 1975 . . . we think it's going to be a great one."



Sampling is part of the tour.