

State wineries stiffen backs to competition

By Robert Downes
staff writer

In the lore of winemaking, the year 1933 deserves a toast, although not because of any vintage of note. The year is celebrated as the repeal of Prohibition and the birthdate of wineries across the nation.

One such business is the Bronte Champagne & Wine Company, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. The company is known as an innovator in the Michigan wine industry and is charting an ambitious course for the future as table wines and champagnes increase in popularity.

"Of all the alcoholic beverages on the market, wine has had the most growth in popularity," said Robert Wozniak, president of Bronte since 1971. "Up until last year, the wine industry was growing at a rate of eight or nine percent a year."

A RESIDENT of Bloomfield Village for the past 17 years, Wozniak has the distinction of being the first vintner in the country to bottle cold duck, a blend of sparkling burgundy and champagne which has since been marketed by wineries across the nation.

He got the idea for bottling cold duck

in the 1960s after sampling a similar beverage which was created at the Pontchartrain Wine Cellars in Detroit. Cold Duck is derived from a German tradition which involved pouring various kinds of alcoholic beverages together at the end of a party.

"We tried to copyright it but couldn't because the name is generic," he said, adding that Bronte still bills itself as the original bottler.

BRONTE IS RATED as the second or third largest winery out of 17 in Michigan, Wozniak said. He added that Michigan is the fourth largest producer of wines out of 36 wine-growing states in the country.

Wozniak joined the business in 1958 after receiving his masters degree from the University of Michigan's business school. In his spare time, he enjoys wine-tasting, golf, skiing and other sports. He has a wife, Pat, and four children. Two children have finished college; one attends Michigan State University, and one is a sophomore at Birmingham Seaholm High School.

Based in Detroit and Hartford, Mich., the company was founded by Wozniak's father, Dr. T.W. Wozniak, in May of 1933, just days after the repeal of Prohibition. A practicing dentist, Dr.

Wozniak started the winery with several of his patients. He died last year at the age of 85.

"We're not sure whether we're the oldest winery in Michigan, but we think we are," Wozniak noted.

He said that "Bronte" was taken from a German company of the same name from which Dr. Wozniak had been purchasing an extract used to make soft drinks during prohibition.

The company's first winery was located at the site of the old Columbia Brewery on Madison and Ripelle streets in Detroit. In 1943, Bronte purchased 150 acres near Hartford in Van

Buren County (west of Kalamazoo on U.S. 12). The property was planted with grape vines that spring, using the labor of German prisoners of war.

THE ADVENT of a city-sponsored housing project forced Bronte to move its operations from Detroit to Hartford in 1951. Administrative and distribution operations are still handled out of the Detroit office, however.

The Hartford winery has a number of historical anecdotes to relate. A farmhouse on the property was once the meeting place of a local branch of the Women's Christian Temperance

Union. Formed in 1879, the group tried to "stem the issuance of many unnecessary prescriptions" at a time when a doctor's prescription was needed to purchase whiskey.

The winery was also once the site of harness races which drew fans from across the midwest between 1901 and 1913. Several of the huge wooden storage tanks on the property were once owned by gangster Al Capone at his Kankakee, Illinois, brewery. They were purchased by Bronte when the government closed the Capone Brewery.

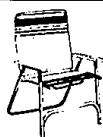
BESIDES COLD DUCK, Bronte is best known for introducing French-

American hybrid grapes to Michigan, Wozniak said.

The company is currently seeking a site for a new winemaking location which will serve to further promote Bronte's wines.

The winner of 28 medals for wines in the past six years, Bronte wines retail for \$2.40-3.00 and are available through 40 distributors in Michigan.

Persons interested in visiting the winery should travel I-94 to Hartford and exit 46, turn left and travel south for five minutes. Tours are year-round, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday-Saturday, and noon-4 p.m. Sunday.



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