



## **The History of Boskydel Vineyard**

By Sharon Kegerreis and Lorri Hathaway

In 1964, Bernard (Bernie) C. Rink ignited Northern Michigan's wine industry by planting a test plot of grapevines on his 16-acre homestead in Lake Leelanau. This decision played a vital role in the advancement of Leelanau's wine industry.

Rink and his wife, Suzanne, who were married August 4, 1956, were looking for a way to instill good work ethics into their boys by putting them to bed tired at night. At the time, the couple had four boys, Jim, David, Tom and Chris, and later a fifth son, Andy.

Rink's eldest son, Jim Rink, recalls his dad's decision in his regionally well-known article titled *Field of Dreams in Leelanau County*. The article describes the reversal of the magical *Field of Dreams* scenario as Rink's sons were told to plow over their handmade baseball diamond to plant grapevines.<sup>1</sup>

### **Inspired by a Book**

Rink earned an undergraduate degree in Library Science at John Carroll University in University Heights, Ohio in 1948 and earned a graduate degree in Library Science from the former School of Library Science at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio in 1949. In 1957, Rink moved to Lake Leelanau soon after accepting a job as the first full-time librarian at Northwestern Michigan College.

As director of Northwestern Michigan College's Osterlin Library, Rink stumbled across a book by Philip M. Wagner called *American Wine and Winemaking* (first written in 1933 as *American Wines and How to Make Them*, revised several times and published as *Grapes into Wine: the Art of*

*Wine Making in America* in 1976). Incidentally, Wagner was the first to introduce French-American hybrids into the United States<sup>2</sup> when he imported 25 Baco Noir vines from France.<sup>3</sup>

Rink, who was born October 22, 1926, experienced wine from an early age. He grew up on a vineyard and vegetable farm along Lake Erie in Avon, Ohio. According to Rink, his father, who bootlegged wine for \$3 a gallon during Prohibition, had a 10-acre vineyard consisting of Delaware, Catawba and Niagara. Familiar with the labor-intensive crop, Rink felt that growing grapes was exactly what he needed to keep his sons busy.<sup>4</sup>

Commercial plantings of wine grapes did not exist on the Leelanau or Old Mission peninsulas at the time, although a wide variety of fruit was flourishing in the region. Rink figured if other fruit thrived then grapes could grow as well. Incidentally, the peninsula's latitude is parallel with wine growing regions in southern France and northern Italy, offering some similar growing conditions.

In 1964, Rink decided to grow grapes and make wine for personal consumption as a hobby while continuing his career as a librarian. Rink purchased grapevines from Wagner's Boordy Vineyards in Maryland, the commercial nursery of the author who inspired him.<sup>5</sup> Rink planted 10 vines each of more than 30 varieties, consisting of all French-American hybrids except for three vinifera varieties including Pinot Noir, Riesling and Chardonnay.



Bernie Rink, Leon Adams, author of *Wines of America*, and Bob Herbst in Rink's vineyard. (Photo: courtesy of Boskydel Vineyard)

While testing the growth of the different grape varieties, Rink handcrafted small batches of wine to sample the results. He shared experiences with his friend, Bob Herbst, who was retired from Michigan State University as a chemistry professor. Herbst also established an experimental vineyard of his own in 1971 on the shore of Lake Michigan near Leland.

Throughout this period, Rink collaborated with

Dr. G. Stanley Howell of Michigan State University and provided field research opportunities for Dr. Howell and students. At the time, MSU did not have access to some of the grapes Rink was growing.

Rink tested the varieties for seven years to determine which ones grew best in the region's climate. In 1971, Rink selected varieties he believed were hardy enough to withstand the cold climate, were not susceptible to disease, ripened early and made good wine. He started the planting of a 25-acre vineyard with those varieties. Those selected were Soleil Blanc, Vignoles (formerly Ravat 51), Seyval, Aurore, De Chaunac and Cascade Noir. Today (2009), Rink also grows small amounts of other varieties, such as Marechal Foch, Baco Noir and Chancellor for blending.<sup>6</sup>

Rink started a nursery about the same time and sold some of the vines to early Leelanau Peninsula winemakers, such as Larry Mawby and Bruce Simpson. Due to the workload of the nursery, he ended the business when all of his boys left home.

In 1975, Rink built an underground wine cellar. He sold part of that year's crop to wineries in southern Michigan and used the rest for personal consumption.<sup>7</sup> While a commercial winery was not his intention when he started growing grapes, Rink decided "to make quality table wines for ordinary people at a reasonable cost." Boskydel Vineyard became Leelanau Peninsula's first bonded winery on August 19, 1976, producing 639 cases of wine that first year.<sup>8</sup>

Rink's original idea when starting the winery was to produce only dry wines. However, due to consumer tastes and Rink's need to generate income, he currently produces half-dry and semi-dry wines, all of which are 100% estate grown and bottled. Rink is producing the same wines since 1976, which include five whites and four reds.

Leon Adams referred to Boskydel wines as "impressive" in *The Wines of America*.<sup>9</sup> Of note is the De Chaunac, which John J. Baxevanis states in *The Wine Regions of America* "may very well be the finest French-American wine in America."<sup>10</sup> French Sommelier Gerard Angelovici declared, "Boskydel Vineyard 1994 De Chaunac to be of exceptional quality and value."<sup>11</sup>

Very reasonable pricing with only three increases in the first 30 years is a true testament to Rink's plan to produce good quality wines that people can afford. In 2009, Boskydel wines range from \$5.45 to \$8.75 per bottle, way below the industry average. Like the wine, the Boskydel label, designed by Rink's eldest son, Jim, at the age of 18 years old, has not changed since 1976.

The Boskydel Vineyard tasting room is an expression of Rink's life. The simple room has remained the same since 1976 other than sporadic additions to the cluttered collection of newspaper clippings, artwork and favorite sayings.



Today (2009), Rink continues to pour samples of the same French-American hybrid varietals selected in 1971.

Incidentally, the original test vineyard was eventually replaced with a chestnut orchard. Chinese chestnuts, roasted in the tasting room, and Douglas fir trees, also grown on the property, are sold in the tasting room during the Christmas season. Other than that, Bernie sticks to just selling wine.

The name for the winery came from an unpublished manuscript called the "Elves of

Bosky Dingle." Rink, whose boys loved the stories, credits one of his teachers from John Carroll University, Professor Al Bungart, for writing the book. Rink also takes pleasure in discovering that the word bosky means "befuddled with drink, inebriated."

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Jim Rink, "Field of Dreams in Leelanau County," 12 March 2009, <<http://www.boskydel.com/history.htm>>.
- <sup>2</sup> Frank J. Prial, "Philip M. Wagner, 92, Wine Maker Who Introduced Hybrids," New York Times, 3 January 1997: B7.
- <sup>3</sup> Jim Gordon with Linda Jones McKee Linda and Hudson Cattell, "Wines That Changed the Industry: Technical breakthroughs and stylistic leaps in North American wines over nine decades," Wines & Vines, January 2009
- <sup>4</sup> Bernard Rink, Telephone interview, 14 October 2009.
- <sup>5</sup> Bernard Rink, "Boskydel Vineyards - Pioneering Wine Grape Production in Northern Michigan," Vintner & Vineyard, August 1989, Volume 3, Number 3: 3.
- <sup>6</sup> Bernard Rink, "Boskydel Vineyards - Pioneering Wine Grape Production in Northern Michigan," Vintner & Vineyard, August 1989, Volume 3, Number 3: 3.
- <sup>7</sup> Mary Godwin, "Le Vin Du Grand Traverse?" Traverse City Record Eagle, 4 September 1975.
- <sup>8</sup> Mike Norton, "Local wines surprise experts," Traverse City Record Eagle.
- <sup>9</sup> Leon D. Adams, The Wines of America, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1985).
- <sup>10</sup> John J. Baxevanis, The Wine Regions of America: Geographical Reflections and Appraisals, (Pennsylvania: Vinifera Wine Growers Journal: 1992): 168.
- <sup>11</sup> Daily News, 14 September 1998, Ludington, Michigan/ St. Julian archives.