



The History of the Michigan Wine Institute

By Sharon Kegerreis and Lorri Hathaway

In 1938, eight Michigan wineries collaborated to form the Michigan Wine Institute, the state's first wine lobbying and promotion organization,¹ to support the interests of their members. As stated on a poster published by the institute, the purpose of the group was "to further the development of the Michigan wine industry. It was created for the express purpose of promoting the manufacture, distribution and consumption of native Michigan wines."²

The eight founding members are believed to be Bronte Champagne and Wines of Detroit, Chateau Wines Corp of Royal Oak, Risdon Wines & Champagne of Detroit, La Salle Wines & Champagne of Farmington, Italian Wine Company of Paw Paw (now St. Julian Wine Company), Michigan Wineries (now Warner Vineyards) of Paw Paw, Houppert Winery of Lawton and Lapeer Winery of Lapeer.

Eventually, other wineries opened and joined the institute, including Paw Paw Wine Company of Paw Paw, Frontenac Winery of Detroit then Paw Paw, Tabor Hill Vineyards of Buchanan, Vendramino Vineyards of Paw Paw, Fenn Valley Vineyards of Fennville, Boskydel Vineyard of Lake Leelanau, and Leelanau Ltd. (now Leelanau Wine Cellars) of Omena.³

When the institute got started, the founding members along with other wineries that opened in the 1930s and 1940s were producing an average 1.25 million gallons of wine each year through the 1940s.⁴

To further the development of Michigan's burgeoning wine industry, the main focuses of the institute were to promote Michigan wines to consumers, support industry interests in the legislature and further the advancement of the quality of the state's wines.

Promotion of Michigan's Burgeoning Wine Industry

Promotional tasks included the creation of public information programs, signs and brochures to educate consumers about the industry.⁵ The institute also sponsored various wine events and was a major sponsor of the Paw Paw Grape and Wine Festival, which was first established after the repeal of Prohibition. The first year of the festival is believed to be in 1935.⁶



Winemaking Pioneers Mariano Meconi of St. Julian Wine Company and Antoni Misauraca of Paw Paw Wine Company cut the ribbon at the Paw Paw Grape and Wine Festival in 1974.

Noteworthy, in 1943, the institute took over an annual grape display after the festival planners discontinued the display the previous year. The institute sponsored a trophy for the grower who had the best display of quality grapes.⁷ This focus was prevalent throughout the existence of the institute.

The Michigan Wine Institute organized many displays of wine and grapes over 50 years.



For many years, the institute made significant contributions to the success of the festival. Members were instrumental in arranging promotional parade floats, sponsoring the festival queen and promoting regional wines in eye-catching displays. In 1946, the institute's float took 4th place.⁸

A Partnership with Wine Grape Growers

The institute focused on quality relationships with the state's wine grape growers. Advertisements were placed in newspapers to encourage growers to work with members of the institute, offering top rates for grapes and profitable years.⁹ They also encouraged growers to plant varieties that were most desirable for producing wine at the time, such as the Niagara and Delaware grapes.¹⁰ In addition to grapes, the institute supported farmers by agreeing to purchase surpluses of other fruits including apples and peaches.¹¹

In the midst of World War II, a meeting was held on August 17, 1942 in the Paw Paw High School auditorium to discuss the rationing of sugar and its impact on wine production. A federal mandate limited the availability of sugar allotted to each winery.¹² The wine grape growers were concerned that the wineries wouldn't be able to purchase as many grapes if sugar was not available to process them into wine.¹³ Wine producers and growers were working together to find a solution.

In the early 1970s, the institute funded research for information for the grape growers. The research was directed at Michigan State University through Dr. G. Stanley Howell.¹⁴ Initially, Michigan Wineries (renamed Warner Vineyards in 1973) provided a \$15,000 grant to Howell.¹⁵ This enabled Howell to convince MSU administrators that the industry was seriously interested in improving wine quality and believed MSU was the means to achieving this goal. The grant was used to evaluate grape cultivars not previously grown commercially in Michigan. Just as important to the research was the evaluation that the new cultivars resulted in palatable wines. Subsequently, Michigan Wineries encouraged the wineries within the institute to provide support for this research.

Lobbying for the Michigan Wine Industry

Activities of the institute included lobbying for legislative causes and cooperating with the liquor control commission to further to advancement on its industry.¹⁶

In the early 1940s, the institute was instrumental in protecting growers from out-of-state competition.¹⁷ At the time, Michigan was allowing the import of fruit from other states, even though states, like California, did not allow fruit from Michigan. The institute's lobbying efforts assisted in changes that improved business for the state's growers.

One legislative issue that affected the wine industry was in 1979 when proposed legislation would lift a ban on the advertisement of beer and wine pricing. The ban was set around prohibition, imposed in the 1930s to discourage drinking. Both Michigan consumers and California producers wanted the ban lifted as they thought it would promote lower prices through competition. Michigan wine producers did not want the ban lifted as they were concerned about the cost of promoting the prices of their products.¹⁸

As sugar was rationed during World War II, there was a huge, pent-up demand for sweet wine when the war ended in 1945. Fortified wines, which are sweeter and higher in alcohol content, were the preferred drink of choice. According to state law in Michigan, wines produced with 16 percent alcohol or less were considered natural and anything higher than that must be labeled as distilled spirits. Federal law considered fortified wines to be a minimum of 16 percent alcohol. California was controlling the market with fortified wines closer to 20 percent alcohol content, thus sweeter, making them the preference over Michigan's 16 percent wines. In 1950, a law passed enabling Michigan wineries to produce 20 percent alcohol wines, fortified wines, without paying a \$5,000 licensing fee.¹⁹ This change boosted the state's wine industry by improving the competition against California's fortified wines. The Michigan Wine Institute was instrumental in petitioning for the passing of this law.

New Law Negatively Impacts Michigan Wine Industry

By 1960, the state was at its peak, producing 2,299,500 gallons, almost 1,000,000 cases each year.

In 1972, the State of Michigan changed law 16A, increasing the amount wineries were required to pay to farmers for grapes to receive a much-needed tax break. The requirement, which changed from \$55 to \$85 in 1966, was now \$100 per ton. The tax-break allowed for a reduction of forty-six cents per gallon provided the wine was 16 percent or less alcohol and made from 75 percent Michigan-grown grapes. The wineries fought against the increase via the Michigan Wine Institute. However, 16A prevailed and shut down operations for many of Michigan's long-standing wineries that had operated since the 1930s.

Michigan Wine Institute Leadership

The establishment of the Michigan Wine Institute was initiated by Mariano Meconi, owner of St. Julian Wine Company, Andrew Murch of Michigan Wineries, Dr. Geagley from the Michigan Department of Agriculture and others. Meconi became president and assumed the role from the founding of the organization and held it until at least 1944.²⁰ Geagley became director,²¹ and Murch became a board member.²²

By 1962, Robert Wozniak, president of Bronte Champagne and Wine Company, was elected president of the institute.²³ He also served as president in 1963.²⁴ At the start of his presidency, Wozniak met with Governor William Milliken to discuss how Michigan's wine industry could continue to prosper and grow.²⁵

Noteworthy, three generations of family members from the St. Julian Wine Company held various leadership roles in the institute. In addition to Meconi, Meconi's son Eugene Meconi, son-in-law Apollo "Paul" Braganini²⁶ and Grandson David Braganini²⁷ acted as presidents and vice presidents of the organization in the 1970s. It is likely that David Braganini was the last president of the institute when the organization dissolved in the mid-1980s after the establishment of the Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council.

First Michigan State Fair Wine Competition

In 1977, the Michigan Wine Institute sponsored the first Michigan State Fair Wine Competition after being persuaded by Carl Damouth, founding member of the American Wine Society .²⁸ The competition was held August 27 at the state fairgrounds at 8 Mile Road and Woodward Avenue in Detroit. Eleven Michigan wineries entered into the competition for a total of 113 wines. Judges awarded 14 silver medals and 11 gold medals.²⁹

Significance of Michigan Wine Institute

The institute was focused on developing quality wines through strong partnerships with the state's grape growers. The leaders of the institute knew these relationships were critical to growing the industry and becoming prosperous. The institute acted as one voice for the industry to cohesively address the challenges facing the winemakers. Without the institute in place for more than 50 years, the industry may not have evolved into the industry of today: thriving, growing and attracting national and international recognition.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ David Braganini, 7 October 2009.
- ² Michigan Wine Institute poster in Apollo Banquet Hall, St. Julian Wine Company.
- ³ The News Palladium, 11 September 1975, Benton Harbor: page 22.
- ⁴ Thomas Pinney, A History of Wine in America, ed. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) page 178.
- ⁵ The Herald-Palladium, "Wozniak Elected as Institute President," 11 September 1975, Benton Harbor: p 22.
- ⁶ A poster in the Lawton Lions Heritage Community museum, showcasing the 1946 festival, indicates it is the 11th year of the festival.
- ⁷ The Herald Press, "Grape Trophy Award Friday," 21 September 1944, Saint Joseph: p 10.
- ⁸ The News-Palladium, "Huge parade of floats climaxes grape festival," 16 September 1946, Benton Harbor, p 14.
- ⁹ The Herald Press, 9 August 1945, St. Joseph: page 9 (an advertisement by Michigan Wine Institute).
- ¹⁰ The News-Palladium, "Wineries Use Big Share of Local Grapes," 26 September 1940, Benton Harbor: p 16.
- ¹¹ The News-Palladium, "Wineries To Be Good Market For 45 Grapes," 9 August 1945, Benton Harbor: p 8.
- ¹² The News-Palladium, "Grape growers call a meeting," 17 August 1942, Benton Harbor: p 12.
- ¹³ The News-Palladium, "Grape growers call a meeting," 17 August 1942, Benton Harbor: p 12.
- ¹⁴ J. Bruce McCristal, The Spirit of Michigan State, 2004, p 155.
- ¹⁵ G. Stanley Howell. Email interview, 4 December 2009.
- ¹⁶ Thomas Pinney, A History of Wine in America, ed. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007): p 178.
- ¹⁷ The News-Palladium, "Wineries To Be Good Market For 45 Grapes," 9 August 1945, Benton Harbor: p 8.
- ¹⁸ Daily Globe, "State Winemakers Don't Want to Advertise Prices," 6 December 1979, Ironwood, p 5.
- ¹⁹ Thomas Pinney, A History of Wine in America: From Prohibition to the Present, (University of California Press, Berkeley: 2005) .
- ²⁰ The News-Palladium, "Grape festival queen presents trophy," 25 September 1944, Benton harbor, p 1.
- ²¹ Michigan Agricultural Statistics, Michigan Cooperative Crop Reporting Service, Michigan Agricultural Statistics Reporting Service, 1995, p 16.

²² Michigan Wine Institute poster in Apollo Banquet Hall, St. Julian Wine Company.

²³ The Herald-Palladium, "Wozniak Elected as Institute President," 11 September 1975, Benton Harbor: p 22.

²⁴ A. F. Mahan, "Michigan Is Now Third Largest Wine Producer," Ludington Daily News, 18 September 1962.

²⁵ The News-Palladium, "Governor's Bottle," 16 January 1975, Benton Harbor, p 19.

²⁶ The Herald-Palladium, "Wozniak Elected as Institute President," 11 September 1975, Benton Harbor: p 22.

²⁷ Daily Globe, "State Winemakers Don't Want to Advertise Prices," 6 December 1979, Ironwood: p 5.

²⁸ Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council, 32nd Annual Michigan Wine & Spirits Competition brochure, August 2009.

²⁹ Traverse City Record Eagle, "A Winner," 28 September 1977, Traverse City, p 16.