



The History of Tabor Hill Winery

By Sharon Kegerreis and Lorri Hathaway

In 1968, Carl Banholzer and Len Olson, a 27-year-old steel salesman from Chicago, partnered to start a new winery in southwest Michigan. Banholzer bought the 45-acre farmland on Mount Tabor Road in Buchanan for \$18,000,¹ where Tabor Hill Winery and Restaurant exists today.

Within the same year, Banholzer and Olson planted Vidal Blanc and Aurora, choosing Vidal Blanc for its late ripening nature and Aurora for its early ripening tendencies. With no formal wine training, the two initially relied on knowledge gleaned from a book called *American Wine and Winemaking* by Phillip M. Wagner and from speaking with growers at nurseries. Incidentally, Wagner was the first to introduce French-American hybrids into the United States² when he imported 25 Baco Noir vines from France.³



Olson and Banholzer in 1969.
(Photo: courtesy of Len Olson.)

In 1969, Banholzer and Olson expanded their vineyard to include 27 grape varieties. These varietals included Aurora, Vidal Blanc, Baco Noir, Marechal Foch, De Chaunac, Chamborcin, Cascade, Chardonnay, Seyval, Vignoles and Johannisberg Riesling. In November, with 19 inches of snow on the ground, Olson relocated from Chicago to Michigan to be closer to the winery. He and his then wife, Ellen, lived in the farmhouse on the property.⁴

In the fall of 1970, Olson and Banholzer brought in two tons of Delaware grapes from a local vineyard and used two and a half tons of young, tender plantings of their own Vidal Blanc and Aurora grapes to make their first wines. At the time, they had 14 acres of vines in full

production and planned for an additional 25 acres in the spring.⁵ Olson and Banholzer, along with family members, crushed their first grapes the old-fashioned way, finding it easier to stomp than hand crank the grape presser. Grapes were placed in sawed-in-half wine barrels and



Stomping grapes from the first vintage.
(Photo: courtesy of Ellen Cote)

foot-stomped into two 200 gallons of juice for wine. Notably, in 1970, Tabor Hill was the first new winery to obtain a license since a plethora of wineries opened in the 1930s, immediately after Prohibition was repealed in Michigan in 1933. Initially, the Michigan Liquor Control Commission denied Olson and Banholzer because they, and their minor stockholders, had not been residents of Michigan for one year preceding the application.

This prompted the pair to apply for a legal partnership, and after working through the

legalities, Tabor Hill opened as the 37th bonded winery in Michigan.

Also in 1970, Olson and Banholzer contracted the construction of a chateau-style building for \$70,000 to house the winery and tasting room. The plans were for a home built in Illinois; had the winery not been successful, it could have been sold as a residence. Today (2009), the building is the focal point of Tabor Hill.



The original Tabor Hill tasting room and winery were built in 1970. (Photo: courtesy of Len Olson.)

Tabor Hill Partnership Dissolves

Before the first fall harvest as a legal winery in 1971, Olson and Banholzer's partnership dissolved due to differences in running the business. Olson bought out Banholzer for \$60,000⁶ and became sole proprietor for a short time. He used money borrowed with guarantees from the Small Business Administration (SBA). Two months after Banholzer's departure, Olson

harvested the vineyard with friends and family members from Chicago who agreed to “work for food.”

The free laborers included Olson’s brother, Paul, his late cousin Billy Voss and Tim Cote, who was involved in the winery in 1970 and had taken an 18-month hiatus to serve in the United States Army at Fort Hood. When Cote returned, he stayed at Tabor Hill another 10 years, acting as vice president, treasurer and vineyard manager. Another of Olson’s brothers, Tom, designed the winery’s first label. A number of other friends helped out during these early years. Olson believed that, “the labor-intensive work of planting and harvesting a vineyard and the camaraderie helped many friends adjust to life during and after the Vietnam War.”

Olson consulted with experienced winemakers, starting with Nate Stackhouse, who, at the time, was with Warner Vineyards.⁷ He also consulted with the late Karl Werner, one of Germany’s most renowned winemakers, who had started a winery in California. Werner, whose family has been producing wines since 1411, was a graduate of the renowned Geisenheim Oenological and Viticultural Institute.

Tabor Hill became incorporated in 1972 and, soon after, opened the tasting room. Olson sold the winery’s first bottle of wine, Vidal Blanc, on July 14, 1972, the only bottle sold the entire weekend. Also, in 1972, Olson added the 10-foot deep underground cellar to store bottles, barrels and tanks of wine. Winery tours were offered to customers and visiting media. In the evenings, sit-down, multi-course dinners, prepared by Olson’s former wife, Ellen, were presented to the media to showcase wines.

A September 18, 1974 *Detroit News* article shows Olson standing at his row of grapevines. The caption reads, “Tabor Hill is succeeding at Chardonnay grapes.” Incidentally, the article also states, “Last year, Michigan ranked third in the nation in wine production behind California and New York.”⁸ This is significant because there were less than 10 wineries in the state producing wines at the time.

It was also in 1974 that President Gerald Ford hosted the ambassador from Austria at a White House state dinner and served Tabor Hill's 1971 Vidal Blanc.⁹ For at least five consecutive years thereafter, Tabor Hill wine was served at the White House.¹⁰

In a May 22, 1975 article in the *Herald-Palladium*, the Michigan Wine Institute announced an introduction of new wines and other developments in southwestern Michigan's wine industry. This included "two new varietal wines into Michigan: the 1973 vintage Chardonnay and 1973 and 1974 vintage Johannisberg Riesling,"¹¹ showcased by Tabor Hill.

Also in 1975, Olson acquired one of the state's first centrifuge equipment, a machine that rotates at various speeds from a central point to separate liquids from solids or liquids of different densities. Incidentally, Bill Welsch and his son, Doug Welsch, of Fenn Valley Vineyards in Fennville also acquired a centrifuge in 1975. The significance of this equipment is that it is highly expensive to operate, though the results are extraordinary. It is used to settle grapes, particularly those with a lot of wet botrytis, stop fermentation on drier-style wines to achieve naturally-intense fruit character and to filter, heavier-style wines.¹² Interestingly, Fenn Valley acquired Tabor Hill's centrifuge in 2008 and, as of 2009, is using both centrifuges.

European Influence

In the mid-1970s, Olson met Ed O'Keefe, Jr., who was planning the planting of a large commercial vineyard on Old Mission Peninsula. In 1974, O'Keefe took Olson and Dr. G. Stanley



Olson with one of his wine trophies.
(Photo: courtesy of Len Olson.)

Howell, associate professor of horticulture at Michigan State University, to Europe to meet with German Viticulturist Dr. Helmut Becker, head of the Geisenheim Oenological and Viticultural Institute, renowned for grape breeding and grape grafting. The trio toured Europe to gain an

education on growing methods and on tasting renowned European wines.

In 1976, Tabor Hill was named regional 9 winner of Michigan Week's Consumer Product of the Year Award and the Agricultural Development of the Year Award for its Vidal Blanc and Vidal Blanc Late Harvest.¹³ In 1978, Tabor Hill won "best of show" for its 1977 Vidal Blanc Demi-Sec¹⁴ and earned three silver medals and two bronze medals at the Michigan State Fair Wine Competition. In 1980, Tabor Hill won "best of show" again at this competition for its Vidal Blanc Late Harvest. At the American Wine Competition in Washington D.C. in 1977, Tabor Hill won six awards, including two silver medals for its Rieslings and a bronze for its Baco Noir.¹⁵

In January 1980, Cote self-funded a three-month educational trip to Germany's renowned Rhine-Mosel wine region. He stayed with Bernd Philippi and met weekly with Becker at the Geisenheim Institute. He also toured and worked in vineyards in Rheingau. When he returned to Tabor Hill, he applied trellising techniques learned in Germany to help the vines grow vertically and give the fruit better access to light and air. He believed this proven method of canopy management used in Germany was well-suited for Michigan's climate.¹⁶

Tabor Hill's New Proprietor: David Upton

Even with the early successes, it was evident to Olson that the business was in financial trouble. After substantial financing fell through in 1978, he began seeking business partners. The SBA gave Olson the time he needed to find a financial backer. Two investors in the area, Whirlpool Heir David Upton, with whom Olson met in 1976, and Cecil Pond, stepped up and offered financial support as potential partners. At the time, Pond was owner of Lakeside Vineyard.

On a handshake, Olson chose Upton and, in 1979, Olson sold Tabor Hill to Upton under a bulk sales act for \$40,000 for the property, which included the building and vineyard. To move the deal forward, Olson had to file for bankruptcy first. Upton set up an umbrella company called Chi Corp with a DBA (doing business as) of Tabor Hill.

Upton used bank notes and income from his abstract and title business to purchase the winery,

as Upton's father expected him "to make his own way."¹⁷ Upton was born and raised in southwest Michigan. He knew the farmland was as fertile as anywhere in the world and believed that grapes could grow as well as all the other fruits and vegetables that have grown in the region for centuries.¹⁸

Upton brought in Dean Owen to run the business side of the winery, while Olson was responsible for winemaking. According to Olson, Owen soon left, though, due to personality conflicts with Olson and Cote.



Tim Cote and Rick Moersch measure juice after a grape stomping in the vineyard for a Tabor Hill event. (Photo: courtesy of Ellen Cote.)

In the meantime, in the fall 1979, Olson hired Rick Moersch, a local high school biology teacher who taught Olson's kids, to help solve a spoilage issue in the lab winery. He analyzed the problem and gave the lab technician, a former student, a solution to the issue. Olson immediately hired him as a part-time technician. Moersch continued to teach and coach tennis and football during the day, and at night, he worked in the lab running tests and doing analysis, often until midnight. By spring of 1980, Moersch was hooked on the challenges of winemaking and was hired by Olson fulltime to manage lab operations.¹⁹

Moersch spent long hours with Olson, discussing the results of the tests. This experience provided Moersch with a firsthand perspective of how Olson applied the test analysis to winemaking. Growing up among "pumps and tanks" as his father worked for ice cream maker Dairy Queen, Moersch was in his element. He soaked in as much knowledge as he could, reading books, visiting wineries and vineyards and, by 1981, had planted his own vineyard.

Also in 1979, Mike Merchant was hired to work in the cellar and vineyard. Merchant is a graduate of Michigan State University's soil sciences and wine grape management program under Howell. He learned very quickly that "the winemaker calls the shots in the vineyard;"²⁰

though, there were times that Moersch and Merchant collaborated on vineyard management and plantings.

In 1981, the late entertainer, Bob Hope, became a huge fan of Tabor Hill's Vidal Blanc Demi-Sec, after first receiving it at a Berrien County Youth Fair. Hope performed at the fair and Olson's daughter, Beth, gave Hope a bottle of wine during his performance.²¹ In later years, Hope often flew into southwest Michigan, or arranged for someone to fly in, to pick up cases of his favorite Tabor Hill wine.

In 1982, as a natural extension of the hospitality given to the friends who "worked for food" and to the media Tabor Hill hosted at the winery for tastings and food pairings, Olson initiated the idea of a restaurant. The menu featured light salads, sandwiches and appetizers.



Beth Olson gives Bob Hope a bottle of Tabor Hill wine in 1981. (Photo: courtesy of Ellen Cote)

Olson Departs Tabor Hill

On June 30, 1982, Upton terminated the employment of Olson, Cote and Moersch. The next day, on July 1, Olson drove to Lakeside Vineyard to speak with Cecil Pond to strike up a new partnership. He bought Lakeside Vineyard under a land contract from Pond, liquidated the business operations and brought in another partner. After the winery license was transferred to Olson, he renamed Lakeside Vineyard to Olson Family Wine Cellars in 1983. A few years later, he sold the business to the late Don Kennedy, who operated it as Berrien Vintner Cellars. Olson left the Michigan wine industry until opening a new winery in 2009 called Founder's Wine Cellars.

In the meantime, within a week of terminating the three key positions, Upton formed a new management team of Bob Lemon as general manager, Moersch as winemaker and Merchant as vineyard manager, realizing he needed this combination of expertise. Shortly thereafter,

Moersch completed the fermentation of a late harvest Seyval and crafted Tabor Hill's Seyval Dry Berry. The late harvest wine won a double gold at the Eastern Wine Competition in 1983.²²

At Tabor Hill, Moersch evaluated the winery operations and oversaw what he and Upton felt were needed improvements to the operations to enhance and stabilize wine quality. He also oversaw the expansion of equipment, as needed, to support the winery's growth.

The new management team focused on producing quality wines by growing the existing French-American hybrid vines well and planning for future vinifera vineyards. In these early years, the winery continued to struggle financially, while putting new systems in place. They remained focused on enhancing wine quality with the goal of gaining regional recognition and attracting and retaining customers. An assessment of the operations indicated the winery could boost sales to 40,000 to 60,000 cases with the right business platform in place.²³ With Upton's financial backing and dedication to the winery's success, Tabor Hill's business operations were eventually stabilized.

A New Direction

In 1984, Upton supported the formation of the Michigan Grape & Wine Industry Council. He served as a founding member of the council after its establishment in 1985.

Lemon left Tabor Hill in 1985. A year earlier, Linda Upton, who married David Upton in 1986, took over the management of the restaurant with a strong focus on the menus. As publisher of *Dining Magazine* in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles, she was a food connoisseur who believed in serving foods that paired well with wines to create a memorable dining experience. Incidentally, Ellen Cote (formerly Ellen Olson) worked in the restaurant for a couple of decades, except for a year hiatus, until retiring in 2003.



Wine pairings are suggested with freshly-prepared entrees in the Tabor Hill Restaurant.

In 1984, one of Michigan's largest and prolific wineries, Bronte Champagne and Wine Company, filed for bankruptcy. Upton acquired the winery and all of its equipment under a bulk sales act. Prior to the acquisition, though, the vineyards had already been sold. They sold off many additional components, though Moersch relocated some of the equipment into Tabor Hill. Hence, Moersch is able to dispel the Prohibition-era rumor that one of Bronte's tanks was riddled with bullet holes from Al Capone. As Moersch explains, "They were drainage holes."

Upton and Moersch hired Bronte Winemaker Angelo Spinazze' as a consultant for many years. Spinazze' stopped by Tabor Hill during every harvest, even in his 90s, to collect 20 to 30 gallons of Seyval juice. He shared with Merchant that he "would start the fermentation, go to Florida for the winter and, upon returning, have a great wine waiting for him."²⁴

Incidentally, Spinazze' celebrated his 93rd birthday at Moersch's winery in the late 1990s and was still receiving wine from Tabor Hill. Before his passing, Spinazze' shared with Merchant that, "watching the Bronte vineyards being demolished" was the only thing that was difficult to bear during the demise of his winemaking legacy.

Today (2009), Tabor Hill continues to honor the late Spinazze' and his vital influence on Michigan's wine history with the Italian-style sparkling Spumante wine.

Tabor Hill's Sparkling Years

It was in 1986 or 1987 that Tabor Hill first sold the Spumante wine, made with the Seyval Blanc grape, using the charmat process. The Seyval Blanc was transferred to St. Julian where it was fermented, filtered, bottled and returned as sweet-tasting Spumante. Tabor Hill labeled the wine as "Angelo Spinazze' Spumante" for which Spinazze' earned sales royalties.

The affordable Spumante was developed around the same time as a new sparkling wine program was launched. In 1986, Moersch, with input from Upton, evaluated what the winery could produce the best. The answer was to create a platform for world-class vintage sparkling

wine. Moersch made his first sparkling wine and admittedly shares that the first effort wasn't great. He recognized that expert help was needed and recruited renowned French Winemaker Claude Thibaut, who consulted with Moersch over a five-year period.

Moersch borrowed *méthode champenoise* equipment from Doug Welsch. In turn, Tabor Hill used the specialized equipment and paid a \$2.50 per case fee²⁵ for its use to make the vintage Grand Mark sparkling wine. The 1994 Grand Mark won a 1999 "best in class" silver cup at a Los Angeles County Fair and a 2000 "best in class" silver plate at the Pacific Rim International Competition.

Interestingly, Moersch produced the sparkling wine for Warner Vineyards under the Brut Champagne label. In 1991, the sparkling wine won Best of Show at the Michigan State Fair competition. The same wine under Tabor Hill's Grand Mark label won a bronze medal at the same state fair competition. Today (2009), the wine continues to be produced from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes and is among Tabor Hill's heritage wines.

While the sparkling wine program was being launched, Upton hired Paul Landeck in 1987 to assist with the day-to-day challenges of running the restaurant. By 1992, Landeck was general manager responsible for operations and hospitality.

In 1992, Moersch left Tabor Hill to open Heart of the Vineyard winery (now Round Barn Winery). Merchant assumed all winemaking responsibilities, a natural fit for the vineyard manager, and is chief winemaker today (2009).

Starting in 1990, Merchant planted the winery's first plantings of Chardonnay, Traminette, NY 62 (now Valvin Muscat), Lemberger, Syrah, NY 76 and Merlot. He also planted additional Riesling, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vines. With the new plantings, Merchant applied the Scott Henry trellis system, which he feels "greatly increases grape quality." In 1994, Merchant made the winery's first wines from the new varietals planted in 1990. Today, he continues to convert less productive trellis systems to Scott Henry.

David and Linda Upton's long-term vision has always been to produce the highest quality wines for its customers. And while, since 1990, production has grown an average of eight percent every year, the Uptons and their team remain focused on quality. Since 1993, Tabor Hill has produced a profit each year. ²⁶

In 2002, Tabor Hill expanded its original building to encompass a second dining room, new kitchen, guest bathrooms and full bar to further position the winery for destination dining. In addition, the original portion of the building was completely remodeled and a new 15,000 square-foot winery production facility was built to accommodate the winery's growing production needs.

Tabor Hill's restaurant serves year-round lunch and dinner five days a week. Under the direction of Linda Upton, it has evolved to become a premiere destination for high-quality Michigan foods paired with Tabor Hill wines. Today, Chef John Paul VerHage, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, prepares artisan dishes that are perfectly paired with a glass of Tabor Hill wine.

In 2007, a 9,000 square-foot expansion was added to the warehouse to accommodate the growing production and inventory which, by 2008, had reached 65,000 cases a year. The winery's Classic Demi-Sec continues to be the top seller. The Barrel Select Chardonnay and Red Arrow Red wines are also longtime favorites.

On January 31, 2009, Upton died at age 87. The legacy he leaves behind is for customers to hold high expectations of the Tabor Hill experience. The Uptons, along with their hands-on leadership team, have worked hard to implement processes to ensure the highest quality production of wine and the preparation of fresh foods of the season.



Upton presenting Tabor Hill wine to Governor Milliken.
(Photo: courtesy of Ellen Cote)

Endnotes

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- ¹ Ellen Cote, Personal interview, 14 November 2009.
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- ³ Jim Gordon with Linda Jones McKee and Hudson Cattell, "Wines That Changed the Industry: Technical breakthroughs and stylistic leaps in North American wines over nine decades," Wines & Vines, January 2009.
- ⁴ Len Olson, Personal interview, 9 May 2009 and email interviews, September 2009.
- ⁵ Al Arend, "Foreign Grape Research Expanding," The News-Palladium, 12 February 1971, Benton Harbor.
- ⁶ The Herald-Palladium, "Court Bars Competitor's Use of Tabor Hill Name," 27 December 1975, Benton Harbor.
- ⁷ Mike Lenehan, "The Grape Escape," Reader, 23 November 1979, Chicago.
- ⁸ Detroit Free Press, "Michigan Wines: The Dry Look," 18 September 1974, Detroit. (Warner Vineyards archives)
- ⁹ Ralph Lutz, "Tabor Hill Wine at White House Dinner," The News-Palladium, 12 November 1974, Benton Harbor. (Note: this article references Trebbiano, though the wine was actually Vidal Blanc, as per Len Olson.)
- ¹⁰ The Herald-Palladium, "30 Years of work bears fruit at Tabor Hill Winery, "estimated year: 1998 to 2000, Benton Harbor. (article featured at Tabor Hill Winery in Buchanan)
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- ¹² Doug Welsch, Email interview, 23 November 2009.
- ¹³ The Herald-Palladium, "Michigan Week sees new wines," 19 May 1976, Benton Harbor.
- ¹⁴ Len Olson, Email interview, 27 October 2009. (Per Olson, he has Best of Show trophy with 1978 and 1980 Best of Show wins.)
- ¹⁵ The Herald-Palladium, "Three Wineries earn awards," 28 October 1977, Benton Harbor. / Mike Lenehan, "The Grape Escape," Reader, 23 November 1979, Chicago.
- ¹⁶ Tim Cote, Telephone interview, 9 November, 2009.
- ¹⁷ Sandra Silfven, "Wine pioneer David Upton Dies," Detroit News, 2 February 2009, Detroit.
- ¹⁸ Paul Landeck, Email interview, 4 November 2009.
- ¹⁹ Rick Moersch, Email interview, 27 October 2009.
- ²⁰ Mike Merchant, 2006 Interview for *From the Vine: Exploring Michigan Wineries*, by Sharon Kegerreis and Lorri Hathaway.

²¹ Len Olson, Personal interview, 9 September 2009 and Ellen Cote, Personal interview, 14 November 2009.

²² Rick Moersch, Email interview, 27 October 2009.

²³ Rick Moersch, Telephone interview, 7 October 2009.

²⁴ Mike Merchant, Email interview, 6 November 2009.

²⁵ Doug Welsch, Email interview, 23 November 2009.

²⁶ Paul Landeck, Email interview, 4 November 2009.