



Michigan's Burgeoning Wine Industry of the 1930s to 1960s

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In the early 1900s, Michigan's once-booming wine industry started to diminish. Grape rot began seeping through the southeast Michigan grapevines, killing off most of the once-flourishing vineyards. Wineries established in the mid-1800s were closing as owners passed away, and heirs chose to cease operations. Though, most significant was the temperance movement that was heating up across the country. On May 1, 1918, the movement prevailed in Michigan when alcohol was banned statewide. A year and a half later, alcohol was banned on a national level when on January 16, 1920, the 18th Amendment of the United States Constitution prohibited the manufacture, sale, transport, import and export of alcoholic beverages. The rollicking era of Prohibition had arrived.

Michigan Wine and Prohibition

In Detroit, it was almost as if Prohibition never happened. Remarkably, the ban of alcohol spurred a prosperous new industry. Rather than aid in tempering the consumption of alcohol, the act triggered the illegal trafficking of alcohol resulting in an era of speakeasies, blind pigs and private clubs where gambling, racketeering and murder were commonplace. Bootlegging across the Detroit River, which accounted for about 75 percent of the illegal contraband arriving into the United States, became such a booming business that the industry reached \$215 million, second only to the state's auto industry.¹

During Prohibition, two vintners opened wineries in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. The businessmen were pivotal in the reestablishment of the Michigan wine industry after Prohibition. One of these vintners was Mariano Meconi who started Border City Wine Cellars (now St. Julian Wine Company). The other was Maurice (Morris) R. Twomey who started

Windsor Wine Company before later establishing La Salle Wines and Champagne Company in Michigan.

Mariano Meconi and Border City Wine Cellars

In 1909, Mariano Meconi emigrated from Faleria in the province of Viterbo, Italy, at age thirteen to Windsor, with his two brothers. They settled in the Windsor region, home to a large base of Italian immigrants. At age twenty-six, Meconi established Border City Wine Cellars, unknowingly launching the advent of his family's longstanding wine history in North America.

Prohibition in the United States inspired the entrepreneur to be creative in distributing his wines across the Detroit River. Family lore says that Meconi's wines and whiskey traversed the Detroit River in a number of ways, including by boat using a collapsible motor.

A 1929 Everroot "fold light" motor was used for stealth crossings of the Detroit River to take the contraband into Detroit. The motor attached to a small outrigger boat. Once safely across the river, the transporters detached the motor, folded it up and hid it for later retrieval.²

In the late 1920s, it was believed that Meconi was either a partner of or collected money for Joseph Kennedy in the sale of whiskey in the Detroit/Windsor and the Port Huron/Sarnia areas under the name of Essex Import and Export Company. This partnership further enabled the winemaker to grow his business.³

On Monday, December 5, 1932, Meconi's wine facility in Windsor, Ontario, was destroyed by a fire caused by a boiler explosion.⁴ Mariano continued to make wine and relocated his winery to Detroit after Prohibition was repealed.

Maurice (Morris) R. Twomey and the Windsor Wine Company

While Meconi was ramping up his wine business, another future Michigan vintner was successfully managing his winery in Ontario. Wealthy Canadian Maurice (Morris) R. Twomey was a highly successful businessman. For seven years, he owned Windsor Wine Company in Walkerville, Ontario.

In 1927, Twomey hired Angelo Spinazze to be a jack-of-all-trades. Spinazze had immigrated to Canada from Colle Umberto in the province of Treviso in northern Italy. He had lived on his family's small vineyard in Italy and, in junior high, studied at the school of enology and viticulture in Conegliano. His father produced much sought-after wines that were sold to local taverns and inns. In 1926, at age seventeen, he immigrated to Windsor through Halifax, following his brothers to North America. He took a job with the Windsor Wine Company, where his brother Dominic worked.

Spinazze did many odd jobs for Twomey, including winemaking for Windsor Wine Company. He also acted as Twomey's chauffeur, often driving him to cheer on the Detroit Tigers at Bennett Park, where he witnessed the legendary Babe Ruth of the New York Yankees play against the Tigers. He also drove Twomey to the high-rolling Book Cadillac Hotel in Detroit, which opened in 1924.

During Prohibition, it was common practice to re-label goods to generate more revenue. High-end Piper-Heidsieck Champagne labels were placed on the less expensive Windsor Wine Company bottles to sell at a higher profit in Detroit. Often, Spinazze was instructed to drop the Champagne off on the docks for covert transporting across the Detroit River. He never stuck around after the drop, though; instead, he quickly headed back to the winery to avoid any trouble.⁵

In the fall of 1932, as Prohibition was coming to an end in Michigan, the business-savvy Twomey began massive renovations of an 83,000-square-foot electrical powerhouse of the Detroit United Railway into a large-production wine facility. Interestingly, he relocated his winery to Farmington on April 10, 1933 - the same month that prohibition was repealed in Michigan and eight months before the national repeal. ⁶

Michigan is First to Repeal Prohibition

Toward the end of Prohibition, it was apparent to most that Prohibition was a substantial failure. On February 20, 1933, the 21st Amendment repealing Prohibition was proposed by Congress. Michigan was the first state to ratify the proposal on April 10, 1933. National Prohibition officially ended on December 5, 1933, and the ban on alcohol was legal again after 13 years.

Michigan was in an excellent position to reignite its wine industry immediately following the Repeal for several reasons. First, the wine businesses of Meconi and Twomey, which were already established nearby in Canada, were easily relocated to Detroit where the demand for wine was high. Second, Michigan vintners had no problem finding ample fruit to produce their wines. A bounty of grapevines were flourishing in southwest Michigan after surviving prohibition by supplying grapes to Welch's grape juice company. And, finally, the price of grapes was at an all-time low due to the Great Depression. The abundant Concord, one of the common grape varieties used to produce these early wines, hit rock bottom at only \$10 a ton.

The high demand for wine and the surplus of grapes at low prices inspired several new wineries to open. These new wineries along with the relocation of Meconi's and Twomey's wine businesses set the stage for a prosperous industry. A few of these vintners immediately built large-production, winemaking facilities to meet the demand of American wine drinkers. Michigan's commercial wine industry was instantly ignited.

Meconi Wine Company

Meconi renamed his wine company to Meconi Wine Company before relocating his Windsor-based winery across the Detroit River to Detroit. Today, the winery is known as St. Julian Wine Company, now the state's oldest winery. (*Refer to The History of St. Julian Wine Company for a more detailed history.*)

La Salle Wines and Champagne Company

From the start, Twomey's vision for his Michigan winery was substantial. Several months before Prohibition ended in the fall of 1932,⁷ he laid the foundation for the state's largest-ever producing winery by renovating an 83,000 square-foot building, formerly an electrical powerhouse for the Detroit United Railway,⁸ in Farmington into a massive wine production facility. On April 10, 1933, Twomey relocated his Ontario-based Windsor Wine Company to the renovated facility and established La Salle Wines and Champagne Company.⁹ The new winery was Michigan's twelfth bonded winery.¹⁰

The business was nothing new to Twomey, a 1925 graduate of the University of Michigan,¹¹ who was owner of Windsor Wine Company for seven years and managing director for the world-famous Joseph E. Seagram and Sons, Canadian distiller.¹²

When asked about the prospects for his winery during a newspaper interview, Twomey stated, "The largest consumption of wines in America is found among those of foreign birth or extraction. Authoritative sources state that the population of greater Detroit alone includes over 755,000 persons either foreign born or with at least one parent foreign born. According to the department of commerce figures, the Michigan market for wines in normal times is estimated at 4,000,000 gallons annually."¹³

The construction of the new facility included winery offices created in an ivy-covered portion in the front of the building. During renovations, several unique features were installed to create a facility large enough to handle a production capacity of 1,000,000 gallons of wine.¹⁴ A third floor was added on top of the building to house crushing vats.¹⁵ The crushed grapes were then sent to the second floor to the fermentation tanks, which were perhaps the most unique feature of the winery. Concrete was poured to create vats that were lined with glass. Each of the twenty fermentation tanks held about 6,000 gallons of wine.¹⁶ Once the wine was fermented, it was pumped into storage tanks on the ground floor.¹⁷ The original ground floor was lowered to host 20 large oak aging casks,¹⁸ holding about 4,000 gallons of wine each.¹⁹

Morris recruited Otto Kuhm, who was highly regarded in the industry, to be La Salle's wine chemist. Previously, Kuhm produced wines for Twomey at the Windsor Wine Company after gaining experience in renowned wineries of Germany, his native country.²⁰

Twomey used blue concord grape varieties to produce dark wines. Niagara grape varieties were used to produce white wines. Delaware grape varieties were used to produce sherry.²¹ Roughly 800,000 pounds of grapes were bought each year²² from vineyards of Paw Paw, Lawton and Milford.²³ The wines were sweetened with Michigan produced sugar.²⁴ The winery also produced sherry, sauterne, Riesling (Rhine), Tokay, Catawba, Concord, Champagne and Sparkling Burgundy.²⁵ La Salle also produced Manischewitz, a kosher wine.²⁶ Labeling wines with names and varietals was not regulated as it is today. Rather, they were seen as generic names reflecting a style of wine. La Salle's popular wine labels include Windsor Club, Royal Windsor and Cat and the Fiddle, "The wine that always keeps you in tune."

Upon the opening of the winery, a large order was placed by the state to sell La Salle wines in stores of the Michigan Liquor Control Commission (MLCC). This order set the winery's distribution in motion. La Salle wines were also on the wine lists of several Detroit-area restaurants, and its Champagne and Burgundy were distributed nationally.²⁷ La Salle's wines immediately garnered high demand. La Salle was advertised in newspapers across the state.

In 1939, Morris built Michigan's first automated bottling room to manage his high production volume.²⁸ He established warehouses in Flint, Grand Rapids, Battle Creek and Marquette²⁹ to make distribution across the state even more efficient. By 1941, La Salle was producing almost half the wine produced in the state³⁰ and was the state's biggest producing winery since Prohibition ended.³¹

By 1966, La Salle had 16 full-time employees, was producing 2.4 million bottles of wine, \$1,000,000 in sales. La Salle quickly became Michigan's largest and the nation's third largest wine producer.³²

Three decades after Twomey established the state's largest winery, he passed away in 1963. Wine production in Farmington continued until 1970 when the La Salle label was acquired by St. Julian Wine Company. St. Julian produced the wines for eight years using the original formulas before discontinuing them in 1978, ending the dynamic legacy of La Salle Wines and Champagne, Inc. ³³

Today, the old La Salle wine facility is a registered historical site converted to an antique store and offices, some of which are located within the former wine vats. The winery can be toured each year during an annual haunted house event around Halloween. ³⁴

Bronte Champagne and Wine Company

Bronte Champagne and Wines Company was another of Michigan's most prolific wineries to open upon the repeal. The winery was established May 26, 1933, six months before the national repeal, by Detroit real estate developer John Corsi. Corsi, later a father of 10 children, immigrated to Ohio though Corsi eventually made his way to Detroit.³⁵

To start his winery, he sought additional business investors in Dr. Theodore Wozniak, Dr. Bernard Wozniak and Michael Rota. At the time, the Wozniaks, who are brothers with an additional eight siblings, were practicing dentists. The partners strategically went public with their company, selling 170,000 shares for only a dollar a share. This public, low cost approach enabled the businessmen to attract investors during the Great Depression.

Interestingly, one of Bronte's most notable shareholders was Charlie Gehringer, a renowned Detroit Tiger baseball star who played for the Tigers from 1924 to 1942 and was inducted in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1949. Robert Wozniak, son of founder Theodore and later the president of Bronte, shares that Charlie attended most stockholder meetings and often bought cases of Bronte wine.³⁶

The additional capital invested by stockholders was used to convert an old three-story Columbia Brewery building in downtown Detroit into a fully operating wine production facility. The construction includes a semiautomatic bottling unit, rows of oak aging casks and

glass-lined fermenting tanks to aid in the production of the wine. Upon completion, the brewery-turned-winery has the capacity to produce 800,000 gallons of wine each year.³⁷

From the start, the vintners aggressively produced and distributed Bronte wine, investing in a fleet of 1939 panel trucks and expanding their business to be a wholesaler of California and European wines. Bronte's 25-man sales force kept busy distributing wines to 5,000 accounts in the Wayne, Oakland and Macomb Counties. Popular Bronte brands included Royal Bouquet, Italian Maid and Corsican. Its Royal Bouquet Brand was sold throughout Michigan.³⁸



Bronte's fleet of 1939 panel trucks was used to distribute wines to five thousand accounts in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb Counties. (Photo: courtesy of Robert Wozniak.)

In 1937, Corsi recruited Angelo Spinazze to take charge of the winemaking operations. Spinazze, who remained with the company for the next 47 years, was an Italian emigrant and graduate of the Italian viticultural school in Conegliano and was previously a winemaker for Twomey in Windsor before he was hired by Bronte.

In 1943, Bronte executives purchased a historic 150-acre farm in Hartford, located in southwest Michigan to grow their own vineyards. Previously, grapes were purchased from growers and trucked to the Detroit facility from outlying farms. Notably, the new site was once home to the famous Keeler Donnybrook Harness Races from 1901 and 1913. Even before this, the Keeler

branch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union was established in 1879 in the farmhouse on the property.³⁹

The farmhouse stood on one of the four corners in the main intersection of the village of Keeler. It was immediately remodeled and redecorated. A 20,000 square-foot building was added to host the new winemaking facility. The new building was constructed with steel from an old foundry, as new steel was difficult to obtain during the war. Cypress wine storage tanks from Al Capone's Kankakee, Illinois, brewery were situated in the main cellar of the winery. A total of 44 cypress and oak aging tanks held 15,000 gallons of wine each and seven glass-lined tanks held 20,000 gallons each.⁴⁰

The first vines were added to the farm in the spring of 1943. Spinazze oversaw the planting of the new grapevines by German prisoners of war who were imprisoned at the old county fairgrounds in nearby Hartford during World War II. By 1949, the vineyard had 70,000 vines of Moore's Early, Niagara, Diamond, Ives and Norton varieties. Spinazze worked mostly from Detroit, except during harvest. He spent the season in the vineyard to oversee the grape harvest.⁴¹ He worked closely with the winery's chemist, John Dohrow, to develop distinct wine styles. As a viticulturist and enologist, he directed the vineyards and finessed the wines. Dohrow oversaw the washing of the grapes, crushing and fermentation before sending the wine to Detroit for further aging and bottling.⁴²



Angelo Spinazze among bottles of Bronte wine.
(Photo: courtesy of Robert Wozniak.)

In 1951, the winery offices and entire production moved to the vineyard in Hartford after the Detroit property was sold to developers. Spinazze, who believed that the key of a good winemaker is quality blending, began to experiment with grape varieties and other fruits, eventually producing 37 table wines and six sparkling wines from 11 different grape varieties.

The winery produced Sauterne, Chablis, Sherry, Burgundy, Delaware and Rhine, using renowned regional names, though the wines were typically used with grapes from the vineyard and supplemented, as needed, with grapes from California. As stated earlier, most wineries of this era used these names generically to express a style of wine.

Spinazze's Italian upbringing and education heavily influenced his winemaking from the start of his North American career. In 1954, with support from Bronte executives, he planted Baco Noir, a French-American hybrid grape, and produced the state's first commercial wine from a French-American hybrid. As a side note, John Leban, a grower in Sodus Township near the Bronte vineyards, planted what is believed to be the first Baco Noir in Michigan in the 1930s.

Bronte's Baco Noir earned praise from renowned wine writer Leon Adams, who called it outstanding. It was also selected as the top wine by Bob Damoth of the American Wine Society at a *Detroit News* wine tasting of nine red table wines from around the world.

Along with the first plantings of Baco Noir, Bronte was also first to plant Seibel 5279, a white French-American hybrid grape now known as Aurora. With these plantings, Spinazze proved that Michigan could succeed in growing and producing French-American hybrid varieties in the cold-climate conditions. During a newspaper interview, Spinazze stated:

We are blessed with a climate comparable to the wine growing areas of France. We have the winds off Lake Michigan to delay budding in the spring until danger of frost is over and the same winds keep the danger of frost low in the fall to allow the grapes to mature. When we first began experimenting with the French hybrids years ago, people said we couldn't grow them here. They said it just couldn't be done. Well, we proved them wrong.

In 1955, annual production exceeded 400,000 gallons. By the end of this era, Bronte's sales volume was high, and operations were effective. Spinazze and Dohrow worked well together and began to pioneer notable products, releases which played a pivotal role in the upcoming era of the wine industry.

Another notable product to be released by Bronte was Cold Duck, the nation's first bottling of this popular wine. Cold Duck originated in the Bavarian region of Germany, where cold, sparkling Burgundy was mixed with previously opened champagne. This combination was nicknamed kalte ende (cold end), which, in America, was quickly altered to kalte ente (cold duck).

Pontchartrain Wine Cellars in Detroit was a pioneer of Cold Duck in the United States. Owner Harold Borgman combined still Burgundy wine with sparkling wine starting in 1937.

In the early 1960s, Robert Wozniak, now president of Bronte Champagne and Wines Company, and some of his colleagues visited Pontchartrain Wine Cellars and enjoyed the taste of Borgman's Cold Duck. Wozniak immediately encouraged Spinazze to develop the wine. Spinazze blended Baco Noir, Delaware and some other grapes before fermenting them together and applying the Charmat, or bulk, method for sparkling wine. Initially, Wozniak had some difficulties gaining wine label approval from the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB), as the agency had never heard of the wine style before.

Upon its release into the marketplace in 1964,⁴³ Bronte's Cold Duck became the winery's bestselling wine as it flew off the shelves. Wozniak proudly recalled placing fifty cases of Cold Duck on end caps in a store on Friday and, by Monday, having to replace the stock.



Bronte Cold Duck, a very popular wine of the 1960s and 1970s. (Photo: courtesy of Robert Wozniak.)

One vintner who immediately took notice of Bronte's success with Cold Duck was Ernest Gallo. Gallo called Wozniak in the 1960s, inquiring about Bronte's wine that was rapidly selling in the marketplace. ⁴⁴ By 1971, Gallo's own Cold Duck-styled wine, André, had become a well-known national brand.

In the meantime, Wozniak had success getting Bronte champagne and Cold Duck on wine menus at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island and in popular restaurants of Detroit. One in particular was Joe Muer's Restaurant, which closed in 1997 after sixty-nine years of serving Great Lakes and ocean seafood to the rich and powerful of the region. Bronte's bubbly were also featured at Sinbad's on the Detroit River, a former Prohibition-era speakeasy, and at Machus Red Fox, where Jimmy Hoffa was last sighted. Many more restaurants featured the wildly popular wines, including Zehnders in Frankenmuth and Schuler's Restaurant in Marshall.

Bronte continued to grow its fan base with its sparkling wines through the 1970s. Henry Ford II, grandson to Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company, and Anthony David "Champagne Tony" Lema were fans of Bronte champagne, believed to have been first produced in the 1940s.

Lema won back-to-back Buick Open Invitationals in Michigan in 1964 and 1965. His gregarious image was earned when he asked for champagne after every win. In Michigan, he requested Bronte champagne for his celebrations. Lema's reputation as one of the world's greatest golfers

of the era lives on, though sadly, he and his wife died when their plane crashed on a golf course in 1966. He was only thirty-two. ⁴⁵

The same year that Cold Duck was released, Bronte began to offer free winery and vineyard tours. The twenty-five-minute tour took visitors through the wine cellars and along the bottling lines, where tour guides presented the production of wines, sherries and champagnes. At the end of the tour, free wine sampling was available in the hospitality room. In 1972, these tours were at their peak, attracting seventy thousand visitors annually to the winery.

This was the same year that Spinazze and his right hand man, Curtis Frick, who succeeded John Dohrow in the 1960s, released four new wines, including Hartford Cream Sherry, a mellow, sweet sherry cuvée. The sherry was baked at 100 to 120 degrees for three months to get its nutty flavor.⁴⁶ After baking, the sherry was transferred to small oak barrels for aging. Along with the popular Hartford Cream Sherry, four other sherries were produced at the winery. “Our real achievements were in developing the champagne business, planting French-American hybrid grapes and the production of premium dessert wines, like the Hartford Cream Sherry,” said Wozniak.

Altogether, the winemaking team produced thirty still wines and six sparkling wines. By 1975, Bronte had distributed nearly 250,000 cases of wine and sparkling wine in the Midwest using thirty-four distributors.⁴⁷ Within the next decade, though, the market changed significantly and had a devastating impact on Bronte’s production levels, literally dropping them in half. In 1984, the management decided to cease operating one of Michigan’s largest wineries of the era.

Risdon Wines & Champagne

In 1933, another Detroit winery, Risdon Wines and Champagne, was established by C. Roland Risdon and Charles R. Risdon. For a brief time, the Risdons partnered with Meconi to produce wines, though the details of the relationship are unknown.⁴⁸ When Meconi relocated his winery to Paw Paw, the Risdons purchased his Detroit wine facility.

The facility featured a semi-automated bottling unit, fermenting vats and oak aging casks and had the capacity to produce 250,000 gallons of wine each year. The winery quickly gained a national reputation for its Imperial Castle Champagne, aged in its natural-process Champagne-aging cellar. The Champagne was sold in Michigan, Chicago and other cities near the state border.

Along with the sale of the facility, the Risdons acquired a Kroger label that Meconi had been producing exclusively for the grocery store chain. They continued to produce the label for several years.

Eventually, though, the Risdons realized that the wine business wasn't for them and sold Risdon Wines and Champagne to John Corsi in 1949, when Corsi split from Bronte.

Frontenac Winery

After purchasing Risdon Wines and Champagne, Corsi moved the business to Paw Paw and eventually renamed it to Frontenac Winery. By 1962, he was producing 187,290 gallons of wine with the capacity to reach 500,000 gallons.⁴⁹

The Corsi family owned and operated the winery until 1967 when it was acquired by an investor group. Carl Corsi, John Corsi's son, remained with the company as manager. Under the direction of the new president, E. J. Wieferman, the new investors immediately put \$250,000 into expansion and modernization.⁵⁰

A new focus on dessert and cocktail wines included a colorful selection of 42 flavors such as Kafe D-Almond, a Kahlua-flavored wine, a spicy Candy Apple Red, and Schnappy Apple, a

natural apple-flavored wine cocktail.⁵¹ The bestseller was Peach and Honey Smash, usually served hot. Other flavors included Cherry Chantilly and Chateau de Almond. New labels designs had bright colors and sliced fruit.

Wieferman, a self-proclaimed Elvis junkie, and Executive Vice President Jerry McClay⁵² released a wine two years after Elvis' death in 1977, called Always Elvis. The wine was crafted from Moscato grapes grown in Venice, Italy, and was limited to 100,000 cases. The wines gained national attention, both bad and good. Some people felt that it was wrong for the multitude of companies producing Elvis products to profit from his legacy, while others thought it was a nice tribute to his life. Some thought that Elvis on a wine bottle was not a great way to capture his life since Elvis was not a fan of alcohol. Regardless, the Always Elvis wine bottles remain a desired collectible item even today.

The fun attitude of the winery and products was expressed in a winery mural depicting young, charming monks in a wine lab, clearly enjoying their work. Today, the mural can be seen on the wall of the Lawton Heritage Museum in the Lawton Lions Heritage Community Center.

Frontenac wines were distributed to seven states. Most of the winery's consumers were senior citizens and younger consumers who were just learning about wine.⁵³ To meet the demand of drier-style wines, the winery bought vineyards in France, Spain, Italy and Germany⁵⁴ and introduced five new red and white wines in 1982, produced from French-American hybrid varieties.

Interestingly, the winery changed its capping from corks to screw caps, an innovative move somewhat common today, but not at the time.⁵⁵ The winery continued until its closing at some point in the late 1980s.

Houppert Wine Company

William C. Houppert was another vintner who started a winery following Michigan's repeal of prohibition. Houppert came from a long line of winemakers from the Alsace-Lorraine region of France⁵⁶ and was passionate about winemaking, which he learned from his father, Franz

Houppert. Franz Houppert, who planted a vineyard and opened a winery in Indianapolis upon immigrating to the United States, sold wines to consumers all over the nation for 25 years until prohibition closed his business.

Eventually, Houppert moved to the Lawton region, which he was told was a great fruit belt region that offered a profitable future for farmers who were willing to grow grapes for wine. From the start, he was interested in producing table wines like those produced in Europe.

To open his budding business, Houppert secured a mortgage with John Turner of First National Bank of Lawton for \$55,000 in 1933 to purchase the former J. R. Day Grape Juice Company building in Lawton.⁵⁷ He hired Robert Wade, a childhood friend of his late son's, as a chemist and winemaking apprentice.⁵⁸ The wines produced by the duo quickly earned a stellar reputation. The winery prospered, operating seven days a week.



William Houppert and Robert Wade in Houppert Wine Company laboratory. (Photo: courtesy of Rosemary Wade.)

In 1937, Houppert expanded his business by selling raw cream of tartar, generated from the lees of wine. This deep-red raw tartar was created by pressing and baking the juice from the lees. He

marketed 120 barrels of the tartar to baking powder companies that buy, refine and bleach the raw product.⁵⁹

In 1939, an abundant crop caused him to ramp up the capacity of his winery from 300,000 to 500,000 gallons. He added new tanks and a fermenting cellar. At the same time, Wade experimented with strawberry, cherry and rhubarb wines.⁶⁰

Disaster struck, though, when an assumed spark from a passing steam locomotive landed on the roof of the building, igniting a catastrophic fire on June 7, 1940. The building's brick and frame walls remained standing after the blaze, though the inside of the building was completely gutted out.⁶¹

Imported French wine casks dating 75 to more than 100 years old were destroyed, and around 100,000 gallons of wine were lost in the fire. The wine was released from the main storage vats to prevent explosions and possible danger to life. It poured out of the building forming a lake that was scooped up by scavengers.⁶²

Determined to rebuild the winery, Houppert returned to the business the same year after reconstructing the building using massive cobblestones hauled in from area farms. Unfortunately, he was unable to rebuild the business aspect of the winery. In 1943, the Houppert Wine Company collapsed after Houppert struggled for a couple of years to rebuild his beloved winery. Turner assumed the property, as he had held the mortgage at First National Bank of Lawton.

Paw Paw Wine Company

Antoni (Tony) Misuraca established the American Wine Company in Detroit in 1934. His experience in winemaking was learned as a child apprentice in his native land of Sicily, which he left at age 14 to live with his uncle in Detroit. After operating his winery for six years, Misuraca followed the lead of many of the other Detroit vintners and moved his operations to Paw Paw. In 1940, he took over the V. and J. Winery,⁶³ which had only lasted a few years after its establishment in 1937.⁶⁴

In 1941, Misuraca began the production of 6,000 to 7,000 gallons of wine under the label, “Virginia Wines,” as contracted by the General Beverage Company of Detroit, makers of Virginia Dare soft drinks. The wines are distributed by 22 representatives across the country.⁶⁵ He renamed his business to the Paw Paw Wine Company at some point after 1941.⁶⁶

Misuraca produced wines under four different labels: Misuraca Wines, Gloria Wines and Paw Paw Wines⁶⁷ and Tony Fine Wines.⁶⁸ Many of his wines were made from Niagara, Concord and Delaware. He also gained a reputation as an experimental winemaker, crafting creative wines from cherry, apple dandelion and tomato.⁶⁹ In 1959, Misuraca produced what is believed to be the first commercial rhubarb wine in America,⁷⁰ of which he developed two types: white from green fruit and pink from the ripe rhubarb. The wine was unfortified but sweetened with sugar.⁷¹

Unfortunately, Misuraca’s winemaking career ended in 1960 when the Paw Paw Wine Company dissolved.⁷² Misuraca and his wife started a successful spaghetti sauce company called Mama Misuraca’s Spaghetti Sauce.⁷³

Chateau Wines Corp./Molly Pitcher Winery

In early 1934, Irishman William Ruttledge established Chateau Wines Corp. in Royal Oak.⁷⁴ Ruttledge, who emigrated from County Galway, Ireland in 1908, was influenced by his uncle who produced wine and tea in Dublin. Upon the repeal of National Prohibition, his uncle convinced him to drop his pump manufacturing business in Detroit and start a winery to take advantage of the newly-opened opportunity.



Wine label touting wine of the times,
Muscatel, produced by Molly Pitcher Winery.

Ruttledge immediately started a production of only port, the favorite wine in Ireland at the time, until he realized that Michigan consumers did not have similar tastes as his native Irishmen. Fortunately, he was quick to note this difference and diversified. He experienced expedient growth and produced wines in his Detroit winery. His facility had the bottling capacity of 8,000 bottles a day and the production capacity of 205,000 gallons a year.⁷⁵

In 1947, Ruttledge relocated his winery near the shore of Lake Michigan in Harbert,⁷⁶ and renamed it to the Molly Pitcher Winery in honor of heroine Mary Hays McCauley. Molly Pitcher was a nickname given to women of the American Revolution who carried water to soldiers during combat. Mary gained notoriety after taking over her husband's cannon when he was wounded.

The winery immediately garnered a reputation for its Molly Pitcher wines. At its peak, the winery was capable of producing 1,000 cases of wines in a day and was the largest grape processor in Berrien County with sales branches in Muskegon, Marquette, Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, Detroit and Lansing.⁷⁷

In December 1953, the winery celebrated its upcoming 20 year anniversary. At the time, Rutledge's son, Eamon, who was Vice President and general manager at the time,⁷⁸ assisted in overseeing the winery's three additional branches in Marquette, Royal Oak and Moline.⁷⁹

As production, of mostly Concord,⁸⁰ continued to rise, a brand new facility was constructed in 1957 to host the winery's offices and laboratory. Unfortunately, thieves set fire to the facility in 1974, causing extensive damage to offices and the laboratory, though no wine was damaged.⁸¹ The same year, at age 90, Rutledge was ready to retire and sold the winery. His son, who was 65 years old, retired along with his father. At the time of the sale, the winery was producing 500,000 gallons of wine⁸² and had four acres of vineyards.⁸³

Cecil E. and Betty Pond became the new owners of the winery and renamed it to the Lakeside Vineyard Company,⁸⁴ making drier-style wines under the Lakeside label while retaining the Molly Pitcher brand for the winery's sweet line of wines.⁸⁵ The Ponds operated Lakeside Winery for the next nine years before selling it to Leonard Olson. Olson, who had co-founded Tabor Hill Winery of Buchanan in 1970, assumed ownership in 1983. He renamed the winery to Olson Family Wine Cellars. Unfortunately, he experienced several health issues and was unable to continue operation of his new winery, which only lasted two years.

Don Kennedy acquired the winery and renamed it to Berrien Vintner Cellars. Kennedy retained ownership until his untimely death in 1991, at which time the winery was disbanded.

Today, the building is home to high-end condominiums called Vineyard Lofts. Several of the concrete vats are integrated into individual home design.

Milan Wineries Company

Milan Wineries was established in Detroit in 1944, a decade after the opening of most of the other wineries. New vintners Charles Milan, Florence Milan and Robert Rubinstein produced high-selling labels named Milan's Cadillac Club, Cadillac Club Reserve, Cadillac Club DeLuxe and Nature Boy.⁸⁶ Another label was called Lakeshore Reserve. Milan's Cadillac Boogie Down

earned a reputation as “pop wine,” which was super sweet, inexpensive and very popular with the “winos” during the 1930s.⁸⁷

The winery had the capacity to produce 201,000 gallons of wine. By the late 1940s, the winery’s growth warranted a semiautomatic bottling unit.⁸⁸ In 1962, Milan was the state’s biggest producer with a production level that reached 681,138 gallons. Unfortunately, the winery closed sometime after 1975.

A. F. Murch Company

Andrew Murch was a partner of John Turner of Michigan Wineries of Paw Paw, which was established in 1938. Murch was president of Michigan Wineries⁸⁹ and on the board of the Michigan Wine Institute.

Murch and Turner remained partners until Murch left in 1949 to start A.F. Murch Company to produce and sell champagne for mail-order. At the time, mail-order champagne was a booming business model in New York. Murch established his new business as bonded winery number 30,⁹⁰ after Turner bought his stock in Michigan Wineries.

In the summer of 1951, Murch built a large production facility to produce champagne as well as sherry and vermouth.⁹¹ The 18,000 square foot building had the capacity to store up to 10,000 cases of champagne and many gallons of other wines.⁹²

In May 1953, Murch signed a contract with Wine Corporation of America of Chicago, which produced wines under the Morgan-David wine label. The contract called for a minimum of 400,000 gallons of juice a year, which was made with Concord grapes. ⁹³

The mail-order sparkling wine business did not work out for Murch.⁹⁴ He purchased a concentrator and went into the grape and apple juice concentrate business. He eventually sold his Paw Paw business to Smucker’s, which was, in turn, sold to Coca-Cola. The Coca-Cola plant exists today.

Puritan Wine Company

The winery, originally the Puritan Grape Juice Company, had converted its grape juice production to winemaking in 1933, just days after the state legalization of commercial alcohol production.⁹⁵

The winery's first winemaker, Henry Counterman, assisted in the conversion from juice production to wine production. During a 1974 newspaper interview, he told a story about the floor collapsing during their first year of production, sending five large vats of wine to crash on the basement floor. "It was quite a job to clean up," explained Counterman. "In those days it all had to be done by hand, and we had a bunch of blue people around for several months afterward."⁹⁶

Puritan Wine Company operated for five years. In 1938, John Turner purchased the facility.⁹⁷ He teamed with Andrew Murch to start a winery at the location and named it Michigan Wineries, which is now Warner Vineyards. (*Refer to The History of Warner Vineyards chapter for a more detailed history.*)

Lapeer Winery

Romanian emigrant Joseph Wakaresku arrived in Lapeer in 1905 and, three decades later, established the Lapeer Winery in 1935 - the only Lake Huron winery in the post-prohibition era. Wakaresku was an experienced winemaker, who derived from several generations of winemakers from the small town of Beba, Romania. He established his winery by producing wines from a 45-acre vineyard he leased from Horace H. Davis, who had previously planted 2,000 grapevines each year for several years on his 200-acre farm. Wakaresku produced three wine labels named Golden Harvest, Lucky Star and Empress of Michigan and produced 12 varieties including Rhein, Sauterne, Burgundy, Claret, Chianti, Port, Tokay, White Port, Sherry, Muscatel, Elderberry and Apple.

By 1937, he was producing 50,000 gallons of wine annually. The wines were distributed throughout the state, across the nation and into Canada. The following year, the Lapeer Winery burnt down. Wakaresku opened a new winery three years later in a new location, designing his

tasting room as an Old English ale house. Unfortunately, the winery closed six years later in 1947.⁹⁸

Post-Prohibition Wine Production

The pre-existence of Border City Wine Company and Windsor Wine Company during Prohibition combined with the ramping up of several new wineries immediately after the Repeal instantly re-energized the Michigan wine industry. Within only two years, nine wineries were producing 350,000 gallons of wine.⁹⁹

Soon, however, the state's wine production exceeded its demand since wines produced with Concord grapes, the most widely used grape in Michigan, often had a "foxy" taste and were not competing well with wines produced from other states, such as California and New York. Fortunately, the winemakers quickly overcame this obstacle in 1937 with a new law proposed by Twomey and written by William C. Geagley, the chief chemist of the Michigan Department of Agriculture. The law placed a tax of 50 cent per gallon on out-of-state wines and only four cents per gallon on Michigan wines, providing that they were produced with at least 75 percent Michigan grapes and that the vintner paid at least \$55 per ton for the grapes. The state's sales increased dramatically.

In 1939 and 1940, Michigan's wine industry was thriving, and annual wine production reached more than 1,000,000 gallons of wine.¹⁰⁰ This momentum continued, and in 1942, production reached 1,250,000 gallons. These wine sales were maintained through the remainder of the 1940s,¹⁰¹ though the majority of the wine was sold within the state.¹⁰²

Another regulation, law 16A, written and influenced by Geagley was that all wine consisting of more than 16 percent in alcohol content shall be categorized as hard liquor. Since the production of liquor required a \$5,000 licensing fee and alternative distribution, Michigan vintners were financially limited to producing fortified wines that were 16 percent alcohol or less. At the same time, federal law considered fortified wines to be a minimum of 16 percent

alcohol. Therefore, the fortified wines produced in Michigan required “lightly fortified,” on the label.

As sugar was rationed during World War II, there was a huge, pent-up demand for sweet wine when the war ended in 1945. To satisfy the sweet palates of Americans and their preference for sweet wines, winemakers fortified the natural juices with the addition of sugar and already-fortified wine or brandy. The more fortified the wine, the sweeter it was. These fortified wines were the preferred drink of choice.

Since Michigan wine was lower in alcohol than wines produced elsewhere, the state’s wines were less desirable to the consumer. California started to control the market with wines fortified closer to 20 percent alcohol content. The stability of the Michigan wine industry was once again in jeopardy.

In 1950, a law passed enabling Michigan wineries to produce wines closer to 20 percent alcohol, which meant the wines could be considered fortified rather than distilled spirits. It also allowed the higher-fortified wines to be distributed and sold along with other wines in grocery stores. In addition, it eliminated the \$5,000 licensing fee.¹⁰³ This change boosted the state’s wine industry by improving the competition against California. Michigan wineries flourished by producing wines using Niagara, Concord and Delaware grapes. The demand for muscatels, ports, sherries and other fruit wines exploded. Michigan’s sweet wine production took a dramatic leap, and by 1960, the state was at its peak, producing 2,299,500 gallons, almost 1,000,000 cases each year. ¹⁰⁴

Through the 1960s, consumption rose roughly 60 percent in the United States. In the early part of this era, Michigan retained its stronghold in the marketplace and was the third largest producer of wine in the nation, behind California and New York. Remarkably, the early 1960s were the pinnacle of Michigan’s wine production to date.

Around the same time, there was a noticeable change in the styles of preferred wines. The American palate had evolved from preferring sweet and fortified wines to favoring drier-style wines. Consumers were demanding table wines that were more pleasing to savor and more

complementary to meals. This change in the market was largely influenced by a few key factors. First, American soldiers, formerly stationed in Europe, had a new appreciation for palatable table wines. Furthermore, new celebrities, like cookbook author and television personality Julia Child, were influencing and educating Americans on how to cook and pair foods with wine. Overall, American wine drinkers were becoming savvier and more knowledgeable about wines, and table wines were the preference. In 1969, the consumption of table wines surpassed the consumption of sweet wines for the first time in the nation's history.

Michigan vintners were aware of this evolution and began plotting how to evolve their wines for the marketplace. As early as 1957, the state's nine wineries started a commission of experts from each of the wineries to meet twice a month, conduct blind tastings of their wines and evaluate the quality. Their objective was to improve the overall quality of Michigan wines and steer consumers away from out-of-state brands.¹⁰⁵

Within a few years, different styles of wine had spurred new vineyard plantings in northern and southern Michigan. However, most of Michigan's vintners, while moving in the right direction, were slow to implement the necessary changes.

California vintners, on the other hand, were much quicker to react. Innovations enabled them to mass produce affordable and improved table wines and distribute wines across the country to meet the demand. California giant E.J. Gallo Winery executed tactics to maintain the winery's prevalent share of the Michigan market.

To make matters worse, a detrimental change in law 16A in 1972 literally shut down operations for some of Michigan's biggest wineries as the amount wineries were required to pay for grapes to receive a much needed tax break was increased to \$100 per ton. By 1973, wine production had significantly dropped to only 600,000 cases, almost all of which were sweet wines.¹⁰⁶ Michigan's instate market share, which was once 80 percent, dropped to less than 30 percent by 1975. Production continued to drop through the rest of the 1970s.

The booming post-Prohibition era came to an end, and Michigan's wine industry was struggling once again. Fortunately, over time, two of the 1930s-founded wineries persevered and began new vineyard plantings to meet the changing marketplace. Simultaneously, new wineries were established in the late 1960s and early 1970s to further broaden the industry's reach. New styles of wines were released by these entrepreneurial winemakers and a new wine era in Michigan had begun.

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