



The History of Michigan American Viticultural Areas (AVA)

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Very often, American Viticultural Areas (AVA) are confused with appellations, or the two terms are used loosely when referring to one or the other.

An AVA is a designated wine grape-growing region approved and established through the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB), formerly the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (BATF). The geographical area was petitioned, most likely by a vintner, for approval and is defined by specific geographical boundaries. In order for a vintner to list an AVA on their wine label, at least 85% of the grapes used to produce the wine must be grown within the geographical area, as defined by law. ¹

An appellation is a protected name under which a wine may be labeled. It's a geographical indication of where the grapes were grown. The rules that govern appellations are dependent on the country in which the wine was produced. These specifications can include, but are not limited to what varieties grapes may be grown, maximum grape yields, alcohol level and other quality factors. ²

Fennville AVA

Fennville is Michigan's first and the United States' third AVA . It was established on September 18, 1981. Fenn Valley Vineyards was and still is (2009) the only commercial winery located within the AVA.

The petition to designate the area as an AVA was initiated by the Welsch family of Fenn Valley Vineyards of Fennville. The family members included Bill Welsch, the owner of the winery, and

his son Doug Welsch and daughter Diane Welsch. The decision to file the petition came after a long struggle between other wineries in southwest Michigan not being able to come to an agreement on what boundaries should be established and which wineries would be included. Fenn Valley Vineyards needed the AVA designation because new labeling regulations at the time mandated that vintage-dated wines needed federally-designated appellations. That rule was since modified to allow state appellations.

The BATF conducted a full-blown hearing at the Saugatuck Library in Saugatuck. BATF representatives flew in from Washington D.C. and Cincinnati to conduct the hearing. Shortly after, the BATF stopped conducting hearings as part of its approval process.

The Fennville AVA consists of 75,000 acres and is located within the Lake Michigan Shore AVA.



Doug Welsch in his Fennville vineyard (Photo: courtesy of Fenn Valley Vineyards)

As defined by TTB, “The Fennville viticultural area is primarily located in the southwestern portion of Allegan County, Michigan, with a small finger extending into the northwest corner of Van Buren County, Michigan. The western boundary is the eastern shore of Lake Michigan, extending from the Black River, at the City of South Haven, north to the Kalamazoo River. 2) The northern boundary is the Kalamazoo River, extending easterly from Lake Michigan to 86°5' west longitude. The eastern boundary is the 86°5' west longitude meridian, extending from the Kalamazoo River to the intersection of the Middle Fork of the Black River. The southern boundary is the Middle Fork of the Black River extending westerly from 86°5' west longitude until it joins the Black River, continuing west along the Black River to the eastern shore of Lake Michigan.”³

Leelanau Peninsula AVA

Michigan's second AVA, established March 30, 1982, is Leelanau Peninsula.

Bernie Rink of Boskydel Vineyard in Lake Leelanau, Bruce Simpson of Good Harbor Vineyards in Leland and Larry Mawby of L. Mawby Vineyards in Suttons Bay initiated the petition for Leelanau Peninsula's AVA. Mawby and Rink wrote and submitted the application.

Their interest in obtaining the AVA was due to federal laws stating that any wine labeled "estate bottled" must be part of an AVA. They were all producing estate-bottled wines and wanted to label them accordingly.



View of Grand Traverse Bay from Ciccone Vineyard and Winery in Suttons Bay

The Leelanau Peninsula AVA is the same size as the Fennville AVA at 75,000 acres. As defined by TTB, "The Leelanau Peninsula viticultural area encompasses all of Leelanau County, Michigan, excluding the offshore islands."⁴

Lake Michigan Shore AVA

The third AVA to establish in Michigan is the Lake Michigan Shore AVA on October 13, 1983.

St. Julian Winemaker Charles Catherman and Warner Vineyards Winemaker Michael Byrne submitted the petition for the Lake Michigan Shore AVA application in 1981.

The Lake Michigan Shore Appellation is Michigan's largest consisting of 1,280,000 acres.

As defined by TTB, “The Lake Michigan Shore viticultural area is located in the southwestern corner of the State of Michigan. The boundaries of the Lake Michigan Shore viticultural area, using landmarks and points of reference found on the appropriate U.S.G.S maps, are as follows: (1) Starting at the most northern point, the intersection the Kalamazoo River with Lake Michigan. (2) Then southeast along the winding course of the Kalamazoo River for approximately 35 miles until it intersects the Penn Central railroad line just south of the City of Otsego. (3) Then south along the Penn Central railroad line, through the City of Kalamazoo, approximately 25 miles until it intersects the Grand Trunk Western railroad line at the community of Schoolcraft. (4) Then southwest along the Grand Trunk Western railroad line approximately 35 miles to the Michigan/Indiana State line. (5) Tabor Hill vineyard at harvest. (Photo: Gregg Rizzo.) approximately 38 miles until it meets Lake Michigan. (6) Then north along the eastern shore of Lake Michigan approximately 72 miles to the beginning point.”⁵



Tabor Hill vineyard at harvest
(Photo: Gregg Rizzo)

Old Mission Peninsula AVA

The Old Mission Peninsula appellation was established June 8, 1987.

The AVA was petitioned by Edward O’Keefe, owner of Chateau Grand Traverse, the peninsula’s only commercial winery at the time.

Old Mission Peninsula is Michigan’s smallest AVA, consisting of only 19,200 acres. Its geographical boundaries are defined as all of Peninsula Township



Autumn vineyard at Chateau Grand Traverse

excluding Marion and Basset Islands, as well as a small portion of Traverse City Township.

As defined by TTB, “The boundary in Grand Traverse County, Michigan, consists of all of Peninsula Township, excluding Marion and Bassett Islands. In addition, the viticultural area takes in a small portion of Traverse City Township. (1) The beginning point is on the Traverse City, Mich., U.S.G.S. map at the shoreline of the West Arm of Grand Traverse Bay at Section 1, Township 27 North, Range 11 West (T27N, R11W), approximately 500 feet due west of the intersection of two unmarked light-duty roads (approx. 750 feet north of Bryant Park); (2) The boundary proceeds north 19 miles along the western shoreline of the Old Mission Peninsula until it reaches the lighthouse near Old Mission Point at the north side of the Peninsula on the Elk Rapids, Mich., U.S.G.S. map, Sec. 23, T30N, R10W; (3) It then proceeds south for approximately 19 miles along the eastern shoreline of the peninsula to the southeast portion of an unmarked light-duty road (known locally as Eastern Avenue) at Sec. 6, T27N, R10W on the Traverse City, Mich., U.S.G.S. map. The unmarked light-duty road is located immediately north of Northwestern Michigan College on the shoreline of the East Arm of the Grand Traverse Bay; (4) The boundary travels west along the unmarked light-duty road (known locally as Eastern Avenue) for approximately one mile until it meets an unmarked north/south light-duty road at Sec. 1, T27N, R11W; and (5) Finally, the boundary proceeds due east 500 feet to the beginning point on the shoreline of the West Arm of the Grand Traverse Bay at Sec. 1, T27N, R11W.⁶

Endnotes

¹Wikipedia, 20 February 2009 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Viticultural_Area>

² Wikipedia, 20 February 2009 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appellation>>

³ Electronic Code of Federal Regulations, 6 March 2009 <<http://ecfr.gpoaccess.gov/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=ecfr&sid=057f99d792668247a3c45b4699417291&rgn=div5&view=text&node=27:1.0.1.1.7&idno=27#27:1.0.1.1.7.3.41.13>>

⁴Electronic Code of Federal Regulations, 6 March 2009 <<http://ecfr.gpoaccess.gov/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=ecfr&sid=057f99d792668247a3c45b4699417291&rgn=div5&view=text&node=27:1.0.1.1.7&idno=27#27:1.0.1.1.7.3.41.20>>

⁵Electronic Code of Federal Regulations, 6 March 2009 <<http://ecfr.gpoaccess.gov/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=ecfr&sid=057f99d792668247a3c45b4699417291&rgn=div5&view=text&node=27:1.0.1.1.7&idno=27#27:1.0.1.1.7.3.41.59>>

⁶Electronic Code of Federal Regulations, 6 March 2009<<http://ecfr.gpoaccess.gov/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=ecfr&sid=057f99d792668247a3c45b4699417291&rgn=div5&view=text&node=27:1.0.1.1.7&idno=27#27:1.0.1.1.7.3.41.94>>