



The History of the Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council (MGWIC)

By Sharon Kegerreis and Lorri Hathaway

The early 1970s brought a spark to Michigan's wine industry, which had first started in the 1800s, with the conversion of many longtime Concord and Delaware vineyards to French-American hybrid. It was also at this time that the first plantings of vinifera grapevines occurred in both southwest and northern Michigan. With a new focus toward producing drier-style wines to meet the evolving palates of American wine drinkers, Michigan's wine industry was changing with the times.

In the early 1970s, Dr. G. Stanley Howell, associate professor of the horticulture department at Michigan State University (MSU), began working alongside established vintners to research wine grapes. Soon after, Howell began leading experiments in the vineyards to test the validity of various wine grape varieties in Michigan's cold climate. *Refer to the History of Wine Grape Research at Michigan State University chapter for more details.*

By the early 1980s, as Michigan's wine industry continued to grow and gain national attention, it was clear that continued vineyard experiments were needed to assist wine grape growers with determining which varieties thrived in Michigan's climate and produced quality wines.

According to Tom Thinnes in a 1984 *Kalamazoo Gazette* article, "In 1973, 1.43 million gallons of sweet wine were produced in Michigan. By 1983, 2,234,000 liters of wine were produced, most of which were dry-style wines."¹

Growers and vintners were making significant investments in new grape varieties in vineyards throughout Michigan. As a land grant institution, MSU was the ideal forum for the identification of wine grapes that could thrive in Michigan.

Senator Robert Welborn of Kalamazoo, Apollo (Paul) Braganini of St. Julian Wine Company of Paw Paw and Howell were among the leaders who campaigned for the establishment of a wine production research laboratory on MSU's campus, and for collaboration among the state's vintners to promote Michigan's wine industry. Other early active supporters for establishing an entity for furthering Michigan's wine industry included Dr. Jack Kelly, Chair of the MSU Horticulture Department and Senator Harry Gast of St. Joseph, who wrote a bill to be introduced to the Senate. The bill proposed the development of a council within the Department of Agriculture to enhance Michigan's grape and wine industry.

Senate Bill No. 112 was introduced by Senators Gast, R. Welborn, Cruce, Posthumus, Faxon, DeSana, Mack, Arthurhultz, Vaughn, Engler, DiNello, Binsfield, Miller, O'Brien, Kelly, H. Cropsey, Geake, K. Holmes, Conroy, D. Holmes, Hart, Brown, Irwin, Corbin, Barcia, McCollough, Fessler, A. Cropsey, DeMaso, Smith, DeGrow and Pollack. The bill passed the senate and was approved by Governor Blanchard and filed with the Secretary of State on July 31, 1985.

Governor Blanchard signs new legislation that establishes the Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council.

(Photo courtesy of Boskydel Vineyard.)



Governor Blanchard (sitting down) and Councilmember David Upton, Representative Mick Middaugh of Paw Paw, Councilmember David Braganini, Councilmember Harry Ruth, Senator Harry Gast, Department of Agriculture Director Paul Kindinger, Representative Lad Stacey, Representative Carl Gnodtke, Councilmember Bernie Rink and Department of Agriculture Randy Harmson.

Establishment of the Council

In October of 1985, the Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council (MGWIC), was formed as Act no. 123 of the Public Acts of 1985, being section 436.16b of the Michigan Compiled Laws. Funding came from non-retail license fees collected by the Michigan Liquor Control Commission. The council was organized within the Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) under Director Dean Pridgeon, who was succeeded by Dr. Paul E. Kindinger the following year.

Dr. R. Dee Woell, a marketing specialist in the MDA's Center for Agricultural Innovation and Development, became the administrative manager of the MGWIC. She administered both jobs simultaneously. In the council position, her first tasks were to develop the structure of the council by writing bylaws.

The council was made up of seven members from different segments of the industry. ²

Founding members of the council included:

- David Upton, Tabor Hill Winery
- Bernard Rink, Boskydel Vineyard
- David Braganini, St. Julian Wine Company
- Harry Ruth, Wine Grape Grower
- Penny Stump, Department of Commerce
- Dr. Jack Kelly, Chair of the MSU Horticulture Department
- Walter Keck, Liquor Control Commission

At the time the council was formed, there were 15 commercial wineries and 10,800 acres of vineyards, 875 acres dedicated to wine production. ³ Michigan was ranked 4th in the United States for grape-growing and 6th for wine production.⁴

The Mission of the MGWIC

The council's main objectives were to provide research, education and promotion for Michigan wine grapes and wines. In 1986, the first full year of the council, nearly \$83,000 was funded for research on Michigan wine grapes and wines,⁵ and the council has continued to provide annual funding for research ever since. The council also focused on education about and promotion of Michigan wines.

The council collaborates with other state entities, Michigan State University and the private sector - all with the focus of stimulating value-added, sustainable agriculture. Due to its position in the state government, the council remains removed from direct lobbying.

Early Marketing Programs

A major task for Woell was to develop and implement a marketing plan. The main objectives were to increase awareness, ensure quality and create new markets for Michigan wines.

One of the key components was to encourage Michigan restaurants and retailers to incorporate Michigan wines into their selections. Woell felt it was important to understand the perception of Michigan wines by these potential buyers and issued a survey questionnaire to gather information. The form was completed by Members of the Michigan Restaurant Association and Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers and Associated Food Dealers, the Michigan Food Dealer's Association, the Michigan Merchants' Association and Michigan Licensed Beverage Association.⁶ Based on the results, it was determined that the perception of Michigan wines needed some focus.

To achieve this task, the council sub-contracted Joe Borello as a wine consultant to act as a salesperson for Michigan wines. Not affiliated with a winery, his role as an unbiased expert who knew the industry and could articulately promote the wines was a strategic advantage for the industry. Borello and Woell met with retailers and restaurants to educate them

about, and let them sample, Michigan wines. They encouraged listings on menus and paid for shelf space in stores to build brand awareness for Michigan wine.

It was equally important to build awareness with consumers. Woell implemented *Passport to Michigan Wine Country*, a program to promote Michigan wines and wineries by encouraging people to visit all of the state's tasting rooms. Borello wrote a regular newspaper column featuring Michigan wines and did some radio and special event promotions. Several other marketing programs were implemented at this time as well.

Once the branding and marketing programs were in place, the council focused its efforts within the industry, acting as a liaison to vintners. MGWIC was the catalyst for bringing the wineries together to market wine growing regions and the overall state's wine industry.

In August 1987, the MGWIC published the first issue of the industry newsletter, *Vintner & Vineyard*, initiated by Woell. The purpose of the newsletter was to cover a broad range of topics and issues of concern to the wine industry with a major emphasis on grape and wine production techniques. The newsletter was also used as a venue for reporting activities of the council. The newsletter was published on a quarterly basis into the early 1990s.

Additionally, it was logical for the group to take over the Michigan Wine and Spirits Competition. Both Borello and Howell were knowledgeable about the competition process, and Woell secured funds to include well-known wine authorities as judges. Borello and Howell also became longtime judges. The competition, which started at the Michigan State Fair in 1977, is now held at the Kellogg Center at Michigan State University and attracts national wine writers and master sommeliers as judges of this statewide competition.⁷ Because of these activities, the MGWIC has been instrumental in leveraging the annual Michigan Wine and Spirits Competition and elevating it to a prestigious industry event.

By the late-1980s, Michigan wines were garnering more attention, and in 1987, Governor James J. Blanchard declared October 4 - 10 of that year, Michigan Wine Week. The following year, he declared November as Michigan Wine Month.

Research about growing wine grapes and producing quality wines in Michigan continued to be a main focus and a large portion of the annual budget. In 1988, \$85,000 was funded toward research.⁸

Late 1988, Woell left her position to work at the Michigan Department of State and was replaced by Karen Wenk. At the time, the council had two main focuses in regard to promotional efforts. The first focus was the *Passport to Michigan Wine Country* program to continue to increase consumer awareness. The second was a *Discover Michigan Wines* campaign targeted to retailers and restaurateurs.⁹

In 1995, Wenk implemented a new five-year strategic plan, enhancing the marketing efforts and continuing the direction of research and education within the industry. The main objective was to increase sales of the state's wines from 2.6% to 5% of the market by 2005.¹⁰

To assist with the tasks indicated in the plan, Mike Bomer and David Creighton were hired as salespeople for Michigan wines, continuing the initial efforts of Borello. Creighton became the Promotion Specialist administering a multitude of tasks for the council.

Additionally, the council began the sponsoring of wine festivals, such as the Leland Wine Fest in Leland and the Michigan Wine and Harvest Festival in Kalamazoo and Paw Paw. Also, the formation of Michigan's wine trails was encouraged by the Council through grants to support their establishment and marketing projects.

Current Programs

Since 1998, Linda Jones has administered the MGWIC. Today, she is Program Manager, under the MDA Director Donald Koivisto and is aided by Karel Bush as Promotion Specialist and Sherri Goodreau as Program Assistant.

Every year, the council hosts an annual conference to give industry members an opportunity to network. The conference entails presentations by experts, who share tips and research with winery owners and winemakers. On a monthly basis, the council communicates with the industry via its electronic and print newsletter issued to about 300 industry contacts.

An annual four-color, glossy *Michigan Wine Country* magazine, first published in 1999, has become a flagship of the council's promotional effort. The magazine is distributed to 200,000 Michigan wine enthusiasts. The purpose of the magazine is to share news of developments and activities within the various wine regions of Michigan and to promote Michigan wines to consumers. Additionally, a monthly e-newsletter promotes Michigan wine to a target of more than 10,000 (2009).

A wine club, Vintage Michigan, was developed in 2002 to further the promotion of Michigan wines to consumers. Membership offers discounts at wineries and events. Today (2009), there are 1,800 members of the club.

MGWIC also maintains a website at www.michiganwines.com. This resource is a consumer and industry advocate's source for winery events, recipes and articles, as well as helpful industry statistics and facts.

Under the direction of Jones, additional emphasis has been placed on increasing vineyard acreage in the state to keep up with demand. From 2003 to 2009, she guided research conducted at Michigan State University to evaluate vineyard regions in the state for suitability for wine grape growing.

MGWIC, in partnership with Michigan State University, continues to lead forums to establish industry-wide goals. A January 12, 2006 report, titled, "Report to the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Michigan State University, regarding the research, extension and education needs of the Michigan wine grape and wine industry," reiterated the need for Michigan State University to continue to provide education, research and

extension in viticulture and enology.

As part of the strategic planning to develop this aforementioned report, it was suggested that Michigan State University establish a wine appreciation course – accessible to students beyond those earning degrees in hospitality management -- to educate younger adults on wines of the world and, specifically, of Michigan. Through the leadership of MGWIC and Horticulture Professor Dr. Ron Perry, HRT 430, “Exploring Wines and Vines” was launched in January 2009 and offered to all students over 21 years of age. The first class filled to capacity within one week and future demand appears strong.

In November 2009, Jones was awarded the Michigan Department of Agriculture Leadership Award which is designed to provide recognition to those who are seen as exceptional leaders by their peers, supervisors, or customers. The award recognizes an MDA employee who, “rises to a challenge to lead, inspires others to follow and to act, and seeks opportunities to innovate and improve areas within the department.”¹¹

Since 1973, wine grape growth in Michigan has increased more than 500 percent. Today, Michigan has 14,600 acres of vineyards, 2,000 of which are dedicated for wine production. There are currently 71 commercial wineries producing more than 1 million gallons of wine per year. Michigan is ranked 4th in the United States for grape-growing and 9th in wine production. The tasting rooms attract more than 800,000 people per year. And, the industry as a whole contributes \$300 million annually to the state’s economy. It is anticipated that Michigan’s grape and wine industry will continue to grow at an aggressive rate.

MGWIC’s 2024 Vision

According to the MGWIC, its aim for Michigan is “to increase wine grape production up to 10,000 acres and 3 million cases of Michigan-produced wines annually by 2024. The successful expansion of wine grape production will depend on growing appropriate varieties that fit diverse site characteristics. MGWIC has teamed with MSU’s Land Policy

Institute and Department of Crop and Soil Science to conduct an inventory of wine grape vineyards in Michigan.”¹²

Furthermore, a new multi-state project, led by researchers at Michigan State University, is underway, called, “*Coordinated Wine Grape Variety Evaluations In The Eastern USA*” for 25 sites in 16 states, including two in Michigan that were established in spring 2008.¹³ By 2017, data collected from these trials will provide invaluable information to the industry.

The MGWIC is an industry asset that is central to the state’s positioning as a leader in wine. The council plans to continue to assist grape growers and winemakers by developing and providing promotional tools and research data to aid in the production of and selling of high-quality wines. The MGWIC’s role is important for continued, sustainable growth in the industry.

Published February 2010

Endnotes

¹ Tom Thinnes, Kalamazoo Gazette, 15 February 1984.

² Vintner & Vineyard, August 1987: 1.

³ Linda Jones, MGWIC, "The Growth of Michigan's Wine Industry in the Past Quarter Century," October 2006.

⁴ Leon D. Adams, The Wines of America, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1985) 205.

⁵ Vintner & Vineyard, August 1987: 2.

⁶ Dr. R. Dee Woell, Telephone interview, 13 October 2009.

⁷ MGWIC, 32 Annual Michigan Wine and Spirits Competition brochure, 2009.

⁸ Vintner & Vineyard, July 1988: 2.

⁹ Vintner & Vineyard, July 1988: 1.

¹⁰ MGIWC 5-Year Marketing Plan, 1995.

¹¹ State of Michigan, 23 November 2009 <http://www.michigan.gov/som/0,1607,7-192-45414-226002--,00.html>.

¹² MGWIC, Michigan Wines newsletter, October 2009.

¹³ Paolo Sabbatini, Telephone interview, 9 November 2009.