



The Early History of the Michigan Wine Industry

Early settlers of the 1800s to the passionate pioneers of the early 1970s

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Michigan's wine history is laden with tales of discovery, perseverance and passion for crafting wine from fruits that thrive in our soils.

Winemaking is first noted in 1679 when valiant French explorers make wine from grapes growing wild along the beautiful Rivière du Détroit. Two decades later, settlers plant a vineyard at Fort Ponchartrain du Détroit.

By the mid-1800s, a viable wine industry is established after enterprising pioneers plant vineyards in Monroe County. Wine production in this region thrives and Michigan is a leader in the industry until the onset of Prohibition. After the Repeal, several new wineries open, many of which relocate to southwest Michigan where vineyards established prior to Prohibition had survived by supplying grapes to Welch's Grape Juice Company.

Between 1930 and 1970, Michigan's winemakers garner regional and national attention for their wines before facing many challenges that ultimately shut down operations for all except two: St. Julian Wine Company and Warner Vineyards. The families that run these wineries have persevered and led the way for today's modern-day wineries and, in the process, have reinvented their own wineries to serve today's savvy wine consumers.

Pre-1800s: First Discoveries of Wild Grapevines

In 1679, French explorers sail the first large vessel, The Griffon, into the "Upper Great Lakes" from Lake Erie. Along the way, they discover an abundance of wild grapevines growing along the Rivière du Détroit, now known as the Detroit River. Father Louis Hennepin, who documented the voyage in his journal, writes of the wild grapevines and the making of "great quantities of wine" during this inaugural voyage of The Griffon, commandeered by Rene Robert Cavelier, de la Salle (La Salle):

"The islands are the finest in the world. They are covered with forests of nut and fruit trees, and with wild vines loaded with grapes. From these we made a large quantity of wine. The banks of the strait are vast meadows, and the prospect is terminated with some hills covered with vineyards, trees bearing good fruit; and groves and forests so well arranged that one would think that Nature alone could not have laid out the grounds so effectively without the help of man, so charming was the prospect."

A few years later, Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, commandant at Fort Michilimackinac, writes a letter to Count Frontenac, the governor of New France, about the legendary region of "du

détoit.” Cadillac writes of “the wild vines heavy with grapes, of which the forest rangers say they made a wine that, considering its newness, was not at all bad.” In 1701, Cadillac establishes the settlement Fort Ponchartrain du Détroit and grows grapevines within the fort’s structure. The settlers eventually use the wine as a form of trade with the Native Americans.

1800s: Early Settlers Become Winemaking Pioneers

European settlers plant vineyards in backyards upon arriving in the Michigan Territory to continue longstanding traditions of making wine. Though, it isn’t until the mid-1800s that winemaking becomes a viable profession.

Michigan’s most notable early winemaker is Joseph M. Sterling, the first to plant a vineyard for the purpose of making wine commercially. In 1863, he plants two-and-a-half acres of vines in Monroe. A few years later, he plants Delaware, Concord, Catawba, Norton’s Virginia and Ives Seedling on a 12-acre vineyard along Lake Erie before starting a winery in 1868 with William A. Noble, Caleb Ives and Samuel P. Williams. Together, they open Pointe Aux Peaux Wine Company, eventually producing an annual 5,000 gallons of wine.

The winery’s high-quality reputation quickly grows when the gentlemen enter their wines in the 1872 Michigan State Fair achieving the first premium, a gold medal, and are noted as presenting the best collection of wines. The following year, William Beal of the Michigan Agricultural College and of the State Pomological Society, along with several other committee members, visit several vineyards for examination. The committee awards a gold medal to the Pointe Aux Peaux vineyard after it is noted as a perfect vineyard in all points of examination, exclaiming that they “had never seen any vineyard better laden with fruit or in better condition in any respect.”

Several more pioneers follow Sterling’s lead and open wineries in Monroe and other regions across the state. The state census of 1884 indicates that 24,685 gallons of wine are produced in Michigan. Of the 3,228 acres of vineyards, 1,550,702 pounds of grapes are sold. Notably, 12,335 gallons of wine -- half of the wine production in the state – is produced in Monroe.

A few years earlier, in 1868, A.B. Jones plants several hundred vines in Van Buren County in southwest Michigan and names his farm, “Pioneer Vineyards” after having early success with selling his grapes. More vineyards are planted and expanded in this region, which help to launch the region’s burgeoning grape and wine industry of today.

By 1900, Michigan is one of the top wine producing states in the union. Unfortunately, grape rot had begun seeping into the vineyards of the Monroe region in the late 1800s. The challenging disease combined with the active temperance movement cause the Lake Erie shoreline vineyards to be abandoned. In Van Buren County, vineyards thrive during and after Prohibition by becoming a source for Welch’s Grape Juice Company.

The Boom of the 1930s: Post Prohibition

The Repeal of Prohibition in 1933 immediately reignites Michigan's wine industry with the opening of several wineries in the southern portion of the state, leveraging Michigan as a top wine producing state once again. These wineries include:

- Bronte Champagne and Wine Company
- Chateau Wines Corp.
- Frontenac Vineyards
- Houppert Wine Company
- Lapeer Winery
- La Salle Wines and Champagne Inc.
- Meconi Wines (now St. Julian Winery)
- Michigan Wineries (now Warner Vineyards)
- Milan Wineries Company/Great Lakes Champagne Wineries
- Paw Paw Wine Company
- Puritan Wine Company
- Risdon Wines and Champagne Inc.

Within a month of the Repeal, Mariano Meconi relocates his wine business to Detroit from Windsor in 1934, renaming it Meconi Wines, Ltd. Unbeknownst to him, Meconi establishes today's oldest, continuously-operating winery, which is now St. Julian Wine Company in Paw Paw and is still family-owned.

William Houppert establishes another notable winery of this era. He opens Houppert Wine Company in the Lawton Vineyards Co. building built in 1903, securing a mortgage from John Turner for \$55,000 and installing casks formerly owned by Al Capone. By 1939, the winery is a "show place doing a brisk business seven days a week." Unfortunately, after a devastating fire, the business collapses in 1943 and is taken over by John Turner and Andy Murch of Michigan Wineries (now Warner Vineyards), which was founded in Paw Paw in 1938. Warner Vineyards is the second oldest wine business in the state and is still managed by the Warner family today.

La Salle Wines and Champagne is the largest winery of the era, and the third largest winery in the United States. La Salle produces wines under the Cat and the Fiddle label, touting, "Ask for the wine that keeps you in tune."

Meconi Wines, Michigan Wineries, La Salle Wines and the other post-prohibition wineries form the Michigan Wine Institute in 1939 to be a cohesive voice of the industry. For nearly 50 years, the institute is instrumental in supporting area growers and pursuing legislation that best benefits the industry. Mariano Meconi is named first president of the institute.

The 1940s and 1950s: How Sweet It Is

Sugar rationing during World War II prompts demand for "sweet and fortified" wine at the end of the war in 1945. Wine is blended and fortified, often with brandies, to meet the sweet taste buds of American wine drinkers during this era of muscatels, ports, sherries and other fruit wines.

Initially, Michigan winemakers are limited to producing wines with 16 percent alcohol or less due to a prohibitive license fee and a state law requiring wines above 16 percent to be sold as spirits and only in liquor stores. Additional legislation levies a 50-cent-a-gallon tax on table wines produced elsewhere, but only a four-cent-a-gallon tax on Michigan wines, providing they consist of at least 75 percent Michigan grapes.

In 1950, a new law enables Michigan winemakers to produce higher alcohol wines without the fee and allows these wines to be distributed along with the traditionally lower alcohol wines. The law change launches Michigan in dominating the state market with its sweet wines throughout the 1950s.

The 1960s: The American Palate Evolves

The United States begins to experience a large increase in wine consumption. Innovations in California enable vintners to mass produce affordable and improved table varieties. American servicemen formerly stationed in Europe have a new appreciation for table wines. Overall, American wine drinkers are savvier and prefer dry table wines to sweeter, dessert-style wines. Unfortunately, Michigan winemakers are slow to respond.

Finally, in the late-1960s, Michigan wineries begin to rethink the grapes used for wine production and the styles of wine preferred by consumers. Warner Vineyards plants vineyards with French-American hybrid varietals in the late 1960s. St. Julian Wine Company soon follows, planting hybrid grape varietals in the early 1970s.

In 1965, a new winemaking pioneer enters the market with these varietals. Bernie Rink plants northern Michigan's first modern-day vineyard with French-American hybrid varietals on Leelanau Peninsula.

Three years later, in 1968, Carl Banholzer and Leonard Olson open Tabor Hill Winery in Buchanan, initially planting the hybrid grape varietals Vidal Blanc and Aurora Blanc in their vineyard. In 1969, they plant the state's first documented European vinifera grape varietals, Chardonnay and Riesling.

The 1970s: Major Developments

Pioneer winemakers stumble and the fittest survive

In 1972, the State of Michigan changes a law increasing the amount wineries must pay farmers for grapes to receive a much-needed tax break. The change shuts down operations for a handful of Michigan wineries established in the 1930s, while others struggle over the ensuing years and through the 1980s before closing.

St. Julian Wine Company and Warner Vineyards survive by strengthening grower relations, planting new vineyards and producing dry table wines crafted with French-American hybrid grapes. Remarkably, St. Julian also experiences the deaths of three family members, also winery executives, and a catastrophic fire during this timeframe. The family perseveres through the 1970s and is now one of the state's largest wine producers.

Wine grape research is launched at Michigan State University

Twelve thousand acres of grapevines flourish in Michigan, mostly in Van Buren and Berrien Counties and largely consisting of Concord grapes. Researcher Dr. G. Stanley Howell is intrigued with grapes and begins working closely with the juice grape growers. During fieldwork, he stops by Bronte Champagne and Wine Company to taste the winery's reputable sparkling wines and discovers thriving French-American hybrid grapes, including Baco Noir that had been planted in 1954.

Bronte Winemaker Angelo Spinazzé asks Howell if MSU can assist wine grape growers, similar to research being undertaken in New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Canada. For the next 37 years, Howell leads research at MSU to identify which grape varieties thrive in Michigan's cold climate, produce high-quality tasting wines and are economical to grow.

Large-scale plantings of European vinifera grapes

In the mid-1970s, Ed O'Keefe plants the state's first large-scale planting of European vinifera grapes on Old Mission Peninsula in Traverse City and establishes Chateau Grand Traverse, one of the state's powerhouse wineries. The winery remains focused on producing high-quality wines with vinifera grapes today, with a strong emphasis on Riesling wines. Notably, in 2010, the winery has 120 estate acres devoted to vinifera and another 70 acres under contract. The winery is growing 100 percent vinifera grapevines.

Several new wineries open

The Lake Michigan shoreline and the bounty of farmland beckon winemakers. In the mid-to-late 1970s, some of today's prolific wineries open, including Leelanau Wine Cellars, Fenn Valley Vineyards, L. Mawby Vineyards and Good Harbor Vineyards. Today, 71 wineries are located throughout the state, including in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Beyond the 1970s

During the 1980s, four American Viticultural Areas are designated in Michigan: Fennville, Leelanau Peninsula, Lake Michigan Shore and Old Mission Peninsula AVAs. The AVA designation strongly positions the regions for marketing wines made from grapes grown in the regions.

In 1985, Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council (MGWIC) is established to provide research, education and promotion for Michigan grapes and wines. At the time the council is formed, there are 15 commercial wineries and 10,800 acres of vineyards; 875 of which are dedicated to wine production. Since then, the council has funded an average of \$100,000 per year toward grape research for a total of \$2,500,000. Currently, 2,000 acres of a total 14,600 vineyard acres are dedicated to wine production.

2010

Today's skillful winemakers share the same vision, perseverance and passion as Michigan's earliest pioneers, producing first-rate wines from fruits that thrive in our soils. Michigan winemakers are earning national and international recognition for their high-quality, palatable wines and many are expanding their offerings to include brandies, vodkas, hard ciders, meads and more.

More than 800,000 consumers are traveling to visit the state's wineries, enjoying special wine tasting events and other unique-to-Michigan food and wine experiences. Michigan's wine industry is growing, thriving and an integral component of Michigan's renaissance.