



The History of Warner Vineyards

By Sharon Kegerreis and Lorri Hathaway

John Turner was president of First National Bank of Lawton, one of the region's last family-operated banks. Turner and his brothers started growing grapes in 1904, following in the footsteps of their father who had grown grapes for ten to twelve years previously.¹

In 1933, William C. Houppert secured a mortgage with Turner for \$55,000 to start Houppert Wine Company, in the former Day Grape Juice Company building in Lawton.²

Houppert Wine Company was a prospering business operating seven days a week until, on June 7, 1940, an assumed spark from a passing steam locomotive landed on the roof of the building igniting a fire.³ Houppert was able to return to business in the same year; however, he struggled financially.

The Beginning: Michigan Wineries

Before the Houppert fire catastrophe, in 1938, Turner purchased the Puritan Wine Company in Paw Paw.⁴ The deed transferring the Paw Paw-located winery to Turner was written on letterhead of the renowned Book Cadillac Hotel in Detroit. Turner teamed with Andrew Murch to start a winery at this location and named it Michigan Wineries.

Michigan Wineries made wine, and received, processed and crushed grapes for Milan Wine Company of Detroit.⁵ The first winemaker is unknown, as Turner was more of a silent business partner concerned foremost with the financials of the company. Murch was the salesman and day-to-day operations manager.

Andrew Murch's son, John, recalls, "We'd visit John Turner on the weekends, so my dad could give him updates on the business and John could give input on the financials."⁶

In 1938, Michigan Wineries founded the Michigan Wine Institute with eight other Michigan wineries. Murch was the Michigan Wineries representative on the institute's board.

Interestingly, four decades later, in the early 1970s, Michigan Wineries was instrumental in providing a \$15,000 grant to Dr. G. Stanley Howell of Michigan State University, which

ultimately convinced MSU that the industry was serious about improving wine quality and was convinced that MSU was the best "agent" for achieving this goal.⁷



Robert Wade sitting on steps at Houppert Winery 20 minutes before fire ignites building on June 7, 1940. Wade becomes Warner Vineyards' first known winemaker. (Photo: courtesy of Rosemary Wade)

In 1943, the Houppert Wine Company collapsed. Turner assumed the property, as he held the mortgage at First National Bank of Lawton. To make it legal, he paid one dollar.

Along with Murch, Turner purchased the stock and equipment of the old Houppert Winery. Houppert Winemaker Robert Wade joined Michigan Wineries as chief winemaker, which further solidified Michigan Wineries in the winemaking business. Wade stayed with the winery until the late 1950s or early 1960s.⁸

Rosalie was a wine label that carried over from Houppert Wine Company to Michigan Wineries. A photograph of a woman was featured on the original

Rosalie bottle, although over the years the label changed to a drawing. Through the 1940s and 1950s, Michigan Wineries produced and sold 16 to 20% alcohol dessert wines under this label, including Muscatel and Dark and Light Port, as well as produced several styles of sherry.

In 1944, Turner established the Paw Paw Grape Juice Company in the Paw Paw facility. He

diversified his products to find another avenue for utilizing the abundant amount of grapes growing in the region. ⁹

James J. Warner shares that his mom, Arleta Turner Warner, Turner's daughter, was fond of saying that her father and Murch made a good team: Turner watched the money and Murch did the sales and marketing. This relationship only lasted a few years, though, due to business differences. Murch left in 1949 and started A.F. Murch Company to produce and sell champagne for mail-order, which was a booming business in New York at the time.¹⁰ Turner bought Murch's stock in Michigan Wineries.



John Turner in winery lab of old Houppert building, speaking with customer. (Photo: courtesy of Rosemary Wade)

On a side note, the sparkling wine business didn't work out for Murch¹¹ so he 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.

1950s

In the 1950s, the Warners originally established the Cask brand to compete with California wine giant Gallo. Originally labeled Cask 59, the 59 was dropped over the years and the wine was produced well into the 1990s. It is believed the 59 represented the first year of this brand. The wines were made with Niagara, Concord and some Delaware grapes, and were table and dessert wines sold in grocery stores. At one time, more than 30 wines under the Cask label were produced.¹²

Also notable was the Warner family's "Warner West" label, which was based in Santa Barbara, California. The small winery, which eventually closed, was located in the charming beach town

along the Pacific Coast. From the patio, customers could sip wines, feel the ocean breeze and possibly catch a sighting of President Ronald Reagan as the location was near Reagan's ranch.¹³

Turner's grandson, Bill Warner, shares, "(Michigan Wineries) was, at one time, four times larger than 17 wineries combined in Michigan and the largest winery in the Midwest."

In 1951, Turner's son-in-law, James K. Warner, took over as president of Michigan Wineries in 1951. Turner passed away in 1964. And, in 1970, James K. Warner's eldest of four sons, James J, became executive vice president.

The Wine Haus

In 1967, the Warners purchased the Village of Paw Paw's 1898 water-works building along the Paw Paw River, located very closely to their other facility. The Warner family converted the historic building into the Wine Haus tasting room, which was renovated with wood from old wine casks.



The Wine Haus includes a re-creation display of "European Champagne Caves."

In the late 1960s, Bill Warner has vivid memories of making "frozen ice wine." "Grandfather and father would wake us up and drop us off in the middle of the night in the vineyards to pick shriveled up raisins in the vineyard. He'd tell us what rows to pick and that he'd be back in a few hours. We had to hurry so the grapes wouldn't thaw. The juice was kept cold; delicate wines full of flavor were made."

The winemaker at the time was John Treuhaft; the first winemaker Bill Warner recalls. "He was European and spoke broken English." Nate Stackhouse came on as an assistant to Treuhaft in the late 1960s, just graduating from the University of

California in Davis (UC Davis).¹⁴ Stackhouse remained with Warner until 1973 when he joined St. Julian Winery. Stackhouse returned around 1990 and stayed with Warner until his retirement in 2001.

In 1969, the Warners acquired the Hommel Wine Company of Sandusky, Ohio, a major sparkling wine producer founded in 1878.¹⁵ The Warners began using the 1890 méthode champenoise equipment to produce Warner Vineyards' Brut Champagne, which earned the winery many accolades in ensuing years. It was produced with a blend of grapes, including Aurora Blanc.¹⁶

Down the road in Lawton, Michigan Wineries actively utilized the old Houppert Winery as a fermentation cellar through the early 1970s. Due to wastewater issues with the building, though, it became more and more cumbersome to use the facility. Combined with aging casks and building infrastructure and the move to steel tanks at the newer facilities in Paw Paw, Michigan Wineries opted to abandon the Houppert building.

Eventually,¹⁷ the vats and casks were emptied and transferred by tankers to Paw Paw. The large wooden vats and casks, which survived the 1940 fire due to being in the cellar, were purchased from the Prima Brewery of Chicago owned by Al Capone.¹⁸ A year after the vats and casks were transferred, the Lawton Lions Heritage group bought the building from Warner Vineyards for a nominal fee.

The group has revived the facility into a thriving community center and created the Lawton Lions Heritage Community Center, where artifacts from the region's early winemaking ventures are on display. This building is a Registered Michigan Historic Site.

The 1970s - 1980s

Accolades and growth continued for Warner Vineyards in the early 1970s. By the 1970s, Warner had more than 500 acres of vineyards. Notably, in 1973, Warner Brut Champagne was named Agricultural Product of the Year.¹⁹ An unknown newspaper source in Warner's archives states:

Michigan Wineries' new Michigan Brut Champagne has been named the state's 'Most significant agricultural development' of the year.' The judging was done in connection with the 20th annual Michigan Week observance. The champagne is described as the first and only fermented-in-the-bottle champagne produced in the Midwest. Cuttings of the French hybrid grapes from which the champagne is made were planted here eight years ago, according to James K. Warner president of Michigan Wineries. The development of the fermented-in-the-bottle champagne will allow Michigan Wineries to compete with New York and California champagnes and open new markets in the Midwest for the firm, Warner said.

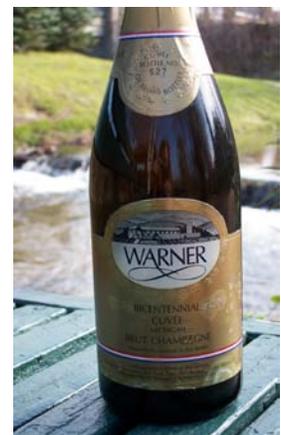


James K. Warner and James J. Warner toasting Agricultural Product of the Year win in 1973. (Photo source: Unidentified newspaper source in Warner Vineyards archives.)

It was also this year, on July 1, that Michigan Wineries became Warner Vineyards, to honor the family's three generations of winemaking. Also, in 1973, President Gerald Ford served Warner's Brut Champagne at the White House.

Warner took reservations early for its 1976 edition of Warner Brut Champagne to celebrate the nation's bicentennial celebration. *"The 1976 cuvee (year of bottling) will be limited production of only 15,231 bottles, each bearing an individual number... The cost will be*

*\$10. Already numbers 1776 and 1976 had been reserved."*²⁰ This was shared in another unknown newspaper source in Warner's archives.



1976 edition of Warner Brut Champagne, bottle number "527 of 10,000" according to label.

Changing Times

At the start of this decade, American's palate for sweet wines began to dissipate. Americans demanded higher-quality, drier style wines to complement foods. Since the inception of Michigan's wine industry in the 1800s, Michigan's national reputation was built on a myriad of dessert wines, like sherries, muscatels, ports and fruit wines. While Michigan was succeeding at these

wines, when demographics of wine drinkers changed and the demand for these wines died off, Michigan wasn't ready.

In the late 1960s to early 1970s, after witnessing early success of French-American hybrid grape plantings at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva and at the Vineland Research Station in Ontario, the Warners recognized that they must evolve to appeal to the new demand for dry wines. The winery began extensively planting French-American hybrids, like Seyval, Aurora Blanc and Marechal Foch, in the family's vineyards. The Warners gave Dr. G. Stanley Howell of Michigan State University access to the vineyards, where Howell evaluated training and crop control approaches.²¹

The Warners hired Dick Vine in 1973 to replace Stackhouse. Vine had been winemaker at a New York winery beforehand. Interestingly, he had been flown into Michigan from New York by St. Julian a few months before to interview for the winemaker position. James J. Warner contacted Vine afterward and hired him to be Warner Vineyards' winemaker. (In turn, Stackhouse went to work at St. Julian for a few years.) Vine stayed with Warner Vineyards for four years. (He later established a wine education and appreciation program at Purdue University.)

James J. Warner credits Vine with initiating the production of Solera Cream Sherry²² and helping to establish the winery in the table wine business. Vine encouraged the planting of more hybrid grapes and establishing a vine nursery. He was also instrumental in convincing long-time juice grape growers to plant French-American hybrids on their farmland.

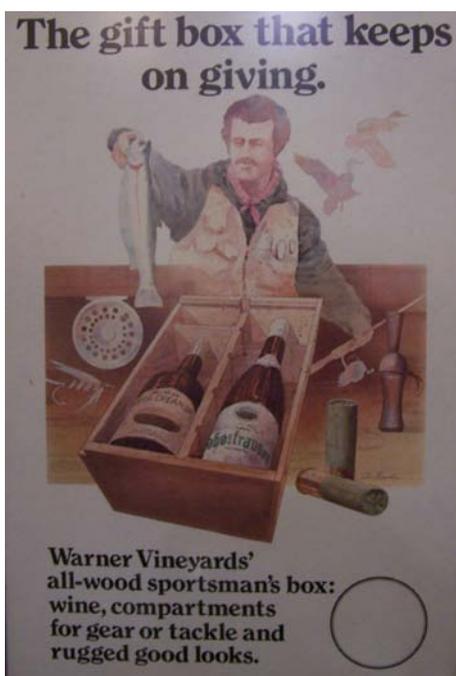
In 1973, the winery began an extensive planting program that included "significant plantings at its own new vineyards as well as other new plantings under contract with growers." The winery's director of grower relations, Dick Schuessler, is quoted in a newspaper article as stating, "(Warner's) plantings will total 89 acres of French hybrid grapes by the spring of next year."²³

Bill Warner recalls being a young teenager, “grafting root stock to produce the hybrid grapes.” The Warners had no idea how challenging it would be to educate people about hybrids. “People knew Chardonnay – not these hybrid varieties,” shares Bill Warner.²⁴

In 1975, James K. Warner, president of Warner Vineyards, was named 1974 Small Businessman of the Year by Michigan’s Small Business Administration, the 11th person in the state to be honored.²⁵ He was cited for his efforts to help make Paw Paw the wine capital of the Midwest as well as one of Michigan’s most popular tourist attractions. An excerpt from a May 19, 1975 article:

“Mr. Warner was selected for his outstanding contributions to the local economy of Paw Paw. He was cited for not only having built his own successful business, but also for helping to promote and further the entire wine industry of Michigan. Warner took over (the winery) as president in 1951. Sales at the time were \$500,000 with 25 employees. Today, Warner Vineyards’ annual sales exceed \$7,500,000 while employing 125 people.”

While growing its new French-American hybrid grapevines, Warner continued to grow in the private label grape juice and concentrate business utilizing the significant amount of Concord



grapes in the region. At one time, Warner was providing grape juice for 50 to 60 private label grape juice companies, including for Very Fine Juices’ 8-ounce bottles, and operating three shifts from its Paw Paw Grape Juice facility. Grape juice accounted for several million dollars a year in business for Warner.²⁶ The grape juice market became an even bigger business for the family than wine. Michigan was the third largest producer of Concord grapes at the time, behind New York and Washington.²⁷

In 1981, the winery introduced Liebestrauben, a new white wine and two sparkling wines, all of which took

prizes in international competitions. According to a *Herald-Palladium* article, estimated as being published in 1981, Warner Vineyards, *“the state’s largest winery, started a \$1.2 million expansion program this year with the help of tax-free revenue bonds through the Van Buren Country Economic Development Corp.”*

Robert Raffin, who was vice president for marketing and sales at the time, said in the article, *“The company is now occupying a new 40,000 square foot warehouse. Work is now underway on new fermentation facilities to expand white and sparkling wine production...”* Raffin said that while final figures were not in yet, Warner Vineyards saw ‘very healthy increases’ in wine sales during the first 11 months of 1981.²⁸

Warner wines continued to gain notable attention. In 1982, Warner Vineyards’ Brut Champagne was the featured sparkling wine for Super Bowl XVI in Detroit. During his presidency, President Ronald Reagan served Warner’s Solera Cream Sherry at the White House.

By the late 1980s, though, Warner Vineyards began experiencing operational difficulties. Due to inclement weather, there were devastating frosts in the Concord vineyards. Customers counted on Warner to supply Concord grapes for their juice businesses. To meet these orders, the company had to go into the marketplace and buy more grapes. Bankers became nervous and, at the same time, James K. and Arleta Warner retired from the business. This culmination of events caused a financial downturn for the winery.²⁹

James J. Warner sought a new partner in the business and closed the family’s unprofitable juice packing business, which had operated for only a few years. He sold 50 percent ownership stake in Warner Vineyards to Arcadia Bidco, a local investment firm. The firm quickly became frustrated with the wine business and all its regulations. A. M. Todd Co., a spice extraction firm, bought into the stock owned by Arcadia Bidco and the juice side of the business to become majority shareholders in the Great Lakes Concentrates Company.³⁰ Warner retained ownership of the wine business segment. Great Lakes Concentrates operated it for two years. St. Julian acquired the juice building in 1996³¹ and still owns it today (2009).

A New Partnership and Renewed Commitment to Customers

Along Lake Michigan shore in Fennville, Bill Welsch has 230 acres of farmland and a large winemaking facility. He had purchased the land to grow vineyards and start a winery with his son, Doug, in 1973.

James J. Warner and Bill Welsch worked together on the Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council. In the 1989-1990 timeframe, Warner approached Welsh with his financial challenges. Welsh recognized an opportunity and, together, they developed a partnership for Warner to utilize Fenn Valley Vineyards' facility and Winemaker Doug Welsch to assist with the production of wines for Warner Vineyards.

1990s Through 2009

On January 31, 1991, a fire burned a portion of the Wine Haus facility and the Warner family lost many artifacts, awards and collections. The family rebuilt the facility.

In 2006, Warner Vineyards' Brut Champagne was served at Super Bowl XL in Detroit.

Also this year, Kevin's... A Tavern on the River leased space within the Wine Haus to serve fresh regional fare to accommodate the winery's customers. Unfortunately, the tavern closed in November 2009. The Warners are in the process of filling this space with a new restaurant.



In 2008, a tornado destroyed the platform alongside the Paw Paw River where Warner customers have enjoyed many summer nights. This favorite hangout is where the Warners host, "Taste the Art and Jazz" weekends for customers to enjoy wine while shopping regionally-crafted artwork and listening to jazz musicians. In the fall of 2009, a new amphitheater was completed to replace the destroyed patio. The new venue gives the

The Warners are focused on reaching customers in new tasting room locations.

Warners opportunities for attracting a broader range of entertainment talent to the area.

The Warner Legacy Continues

Warner Vineyards established a tasting room in the beach town of South Haven in 2004 to reach new customers of this popular summer destination. Five years later, they opened another satellite tasting room in Marshall in the historic Flower Haus. Additional tasting room locations are currently being planned.

Today (2009), Warner Vineyards wines, crafted in Fennville by Welsch,³² consist of 100 percent of grapes and other fruits, including blueberries, cherries and peaches, from Lake Michigan Shore appellation. The Warner family's vision is to continue to serve customers from tasting room locations in Paw Paw and in prime tourist areas.

Endnotes

-
- ¹ The Courier-Leader, "Grape, Wine Industry.." (full title is illegible), 2 July 1976, courtesy of Paw Paw Grape and Wine Festival Association.
- ² Lawton Lions Heritage Community Center brochure.
- ³ Lawton Lions Heritage Community Center brochure.
- ⁴ Puritan Wine Company is indicated on plat map, provided by David Braganini, who now owns the building. James J. Warner recalls seeing the deed transferring the building to his grandfather, John Turner.
- ⁵ David Braganini, Personal interview, 28 March 2009./John Murch, Telephone interview, 12 October 2009.
- ⁶ John Murch, Telephone interview, 12 October 2009.
- ⁷ G. Stanley Howell, Email interview, 4 December 2009.
- ⁸ John Murch, Telephone interview, 12 October 2009./Rosemary Wade (Winemaker Robert Wade's daughter), Telephone interview, 9 October 2009.
- ⁹ Newspaper article, formerly hanging at Warner Vineyards, 1973, (publisher unknown).
- ¹⁰ John Murch, Telephone interview, 12 October 2009.
- ¹¹ James J. Warner, 28 September 2009, Personal interview./John Murch, Telephone interview, 12 October 2009.
- ¹² Detroit Free Press, 16 June 1975, (Warner Vineyards advertisement).
- ¹³ David Braganini, Email interview, 23 November 2009.
- ¹⁴ Mike Lenehan, "The Grape Escape," (Chicago) Reader, 23 November 1979.
- ¹⁵ James J. and Pat Warner, "Warner Vineyards boasts a long and celebrated history, and a champagne success story," Vintner & Vineyard, October 1991.
- ¹⁶ James J. Warner, Telephone interview, 2 December 2009./ (newspaper article provided by Rosemary Wade, date and source unknown).
- ¹⁷ Lawton Lions Heritage Community Center brochure, 1989.
- ¹⁸ John Jennings, "Bob's book is full of fun and history," Tuscan Citizen, 4 March 1994.
- ¹⁹ "New Champagne Wins State Award," (source unknown/Warner Vineyards archives).
- ²⁰ Unknown newspaper source found in Warner Vineyards archives.
- ²¹ G. Stanley Howell, "Marechal Foch—it's a red variety for all regions," Vintner & Vineyard, February 1988.

²² James J. Warner, Telephone interview, 28 September 2009, per Warner, the 1946 on early bottle labels refers to the first vintage of sherry that went into production.

²³ Unknown newspaper source in Warner Vineyards archives.

²⁴ Bill Warner, Personal interview, 7 October 2009.

²⁵ "James Warner Named Michigan's 'Small Businessman of the Year, 19 May 1975, (source unknown).

²⁶ James J. Warner, Telephone interview, 28 September 2009.

²⁷ James J. Warner, Telephone interview, 2 December 2009.

²⁸ Herald-Palladium, "Area winemakers mark sales hike," (date unknown, possibly 1981, St. Julian archives).

²⁹ James J. Warner, Telephone interview, 28 September 2009.

³⁰ Kristen Garceau, "Reorganization of Warner Vineyards continues," Kalamazoo Gazette, 28 March 1990.

³¹ David Braganini, Email interview, 23 November 2009.

³² Doug Welsch, Email interview, 23 November 2009.