

WINE COUNTRY ... A BIT CLOSER TO HOME

Michigan's Leelanau and Old Mission peninsulas offer stunning natural beauty, charming hospitality and world-class wines

Been thinking of a wine country vacation in the rolling hills of Tuscany, beautiful Napa Valley, or perhaps a trip to Oregon or Washington State?

One of the drawbacks to such trips is not just the distance from Madison County, but the cost once you get there. Those areas offer world-class wines with dining and lodging options at world-class prices. Luxury rooms can run well past \$500 a night in Napa's premier lodges and inns.

But there is a closer alternative, just over six hours by car, that might be surprising.

Fabulous accommodations, an emerging "foodie" region, and world-class wines can be found in upper state Michigan.

A summer 2010 trip to Michigan's Leelanau Peninsula was a real eye opener for its beauty, great wine and hospitality.

"Wine consumers' interests are in the visual arts, performing arts, culinary arts, environment and outdoor recreation," said Don Coe of Black Star Farms near Suttons Bay. "We are the cornerstone for all those interests.

"For the visual arts, we have a great museum downtown (Traverse City) but every little village

has a strong art community or galleries because it is a picturesque place. For persons interested in performing arts, we have Interlochen, one of the greatest music centers in the world. For the culinary arts, we have the Great Lakes Culinary Institute, which gave us the feeder into great restaurants. For outdoor activities, we have the golf courses and the beaches."

And they have the beautiful Grand Traverse Bay that dominates the landscape. Coe's Black Star Farms overlooks the bay and leads the agritourism movement on the Peninsula. The Black Star Inn offers accommodations that are pricey by most Midwestern standards but half of what you'd pay at some of the world's premier wine regions. The operation offers a winery tasting room, restaurant, orchards and petting zoo all on an equine estate.

Black Star is one of the area's primary winery attractions, drawing 90,000 of the state's 800,000 annual wine visitors.



Howard Hewitt

Leelanau Cellars' tasting room sits on the shorefront just north of charming Suttons Bay. You can taste Michigan's cool climate wines and watch the sailboats.

"We've made an intentional effort to try to sell the region," said Tony Lentych, general manager of Leelanau Cellars and an Indiana native. "This is

Michigan's wine coast. There are so many people in Chicago who drive up and stop in southwest Michigan and think they've been to wine country. They need to come up and see this."

But for real wine fans, it's about good juice. There are more than 25 wineries to visit on the Leelanau Peninsula and the Old Mission Peninsula.

You can have sparkling wine at L. Mawby, or taste one of the state's biggest selections at Black Star Farms or at Grand Traverse Bay, check out the fabulous Pinot Noir at Shady Lane Cellars or 45 North. Visit Chateau Chantel and think you're in France. Sample nationally honored Riesling in a historic school house at Peninsula Cellars. Or

even stop by the small winery run by Madonna's father, Ciccone Vineyards. (Yes, that Madonna!)

The state's calling card is Riesling and they do the grape in various styles with quality as good as any you'll find from Washington State, New York or even Germany. Many of the Pinot Noir wines showed promise with just a few rivaling the great Pinot produced in Oregon.

"We're what we politely refer to as an emerging wine region," Shady Lane winemaker Adam Satchwell said. "Visitors should expect some pleasant surprises. There is a real serious push for quality."

"I'd also say visitors should expect a little bit more diversity than they might think, there are a lot of people doing a lot of different wines successfully. If you know anything about Michigan, you probably know about the Rieslings and we certainly have gained some recognition for it. But what people are surprised about is a lot of the reds are emerging. Our Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc really surprise a lot of people."

Of the 10 wineries visited, virtually all reported increasing annual sales. The winemakers and owners said repeat visitors drive their business.

The biggest drawback found during those visits was varying price points. There are plenty of well-priced wines that wouldn't draw a wine drinker's second thought. Some of the best wines do come at a premium price you might not expect for a Midwestern wine. Still, \$30-\$40 for a world-class wine is a good value.

"When we started here 12 years ago there were five wineries and now there are 26," Coe said. When Coe started Black Star Farms, Michigan accounted for about 3 percent of the wine market, but in his 12 years the state has doubled its share.

"At 6 percent of the total wine market, there is plenty of room for growth. Our sales have increased double digit every year except last year. But we were growing business at 15-20 percent some of those years."

All of Michigan's wineries emphasize that the lighter, cool-climate wines are better paired with food than some of the fruit bomb, high-acidic wines from other areas.

Tasting wines in the southwest and the peninsula showed a variety of quality wines hard to match in the lower Midwest.

"This is probably just one of the most beautiful spots on the planet as far as I'm concerned," Satchwell said. "You get some good restaurants in Traverse City with good food, see some great scenery and drink good wine. "That's a good spot to be in."

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Peninsula Cellars is located inside a historic schoolhouse on Old Mission Peninsula. The winery's offerings feature school-related names such as Old School Red, Detention and Homework. The family-owned operation also has a variety of cherry wines.

Leelanau Peninsula Wineries

Black Star Farms
Cherry Republic Winery
Ciccone Vineyard & Winery
Leelanau Wine Cellars
Shady Lane Cellars

Old Mission Wineries

Chateau Chantal
Bowers Harbor Vineyards
Brys Estate Vineyard & Winery
Chateau Grand Traverse
Peninsula Cellars

The Second Harvest Food Bank of East Central Indiana Presents:

The 15th Annual Dream Ball

February 12th, 2011

6:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. at the Horizon Convention Center in Muncie

Join us for an evening of elegance and romance to benefit the Second Harvest Food Bank of East Central Indiana. The evening's festivities include a black tie optional dinner, entertainment, and a live and silent auction. Entertainment by "band_945", featuring vocalist Jennifer Stanley.

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