Fertile Ground
POSSIBILITIES GROW IN IOWA

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Iowa Wines Compete for Palates
story by J. WILSON
hardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon. The main thoroughfares of America’s wine aisles use guideposts — the names of wines themselves as well as the grapes from which they are produced — that even a wine novice is likely to recognize. Here in Iowa, the local pressed-grape back roads are trickier to navigate: Seyval Blanc, Vignoles, Marechal Foch, to name a few. These are cold-climate grape cultivars embraced by vintners in the upper Midwest and other cold-climate regions of North America. With low winter temperatures, late frosts, and a short growing season — as well as fungi caused by hot and humid summer conditions — Iowa vineyards are at a meteorological disadvantage compared to other grape-growing regions. But decades of research, hybridization, and trial and error have brought hope to wine lovers in the state.

Educating Palates
Winemaking in Iowa is nothing new — many homesteaders established vineyards on their farms, and the state’s first commercial vineyard was planted by A.S. Bonham near Council Bluffs in 1857 — nor are its challenges. The hard winter of 1898–1899 severely damaged Iowa’s nurseries and fruit crops. Few vines survived. Prohibition came in 1920, bringing the production and sale of wine to a halt until 1933. In 1940 the Armistice Day Blizzard of November 11–12 further dented the industry. What remained of the state’s vines was weakened by herbicide drift as corn production in the state took precedence. Many quiet grape-growing years would pass before a wine industry in Iowa began to reconstitute.

Fast-forward more than 50 years. There were only 13 wineries in Iowa in 1999, but a series of informational meetings headed up by Ron Mark of Summerset Winery, Bill Brown of Timber Hill Winery, and Mike White of the Iowa State Extension marked an uptick in interest and entrepreneurial action. “I needed more grapes,” says Mark, who had 4 to 5 acres of vineyard on his land but was looking to boost production. “We put on a seminar hoping for five or six guys to consider growing grapes. Over 200 people showed up.”
That seminar led to a series of conversations around the state and provided an overnight shot in the arm to the Iowa wine industry. Today there are nearly 100 wineries in the state and about 320 commercial vineyards. Total production for the 12-month period ending June 30, 2012, was 347,954 gallons — up 35,000 gallons over the previous year. “There’s a great interest in the wine industry overall,” says Colleen Murphy of the Iowa Beer and Wine Promotion Board, which works to educate consumers and promote Iowa wineries.

With lesser-known Native American and French-American hybrid grape varietals driving the industry, however, language remains a problem. “People come into a winery and say, ‘I like a Chardonnay,’ but what’s interesting is that those people may not like a Chardonnay,” says Murphy. “They like white wine, and that’s the only term for white wine that they know.”

Misconceptions create obstacles, too. “I would say that there is first and foremost the stigma that all wines grown in the Midwest, and Iowa in particular, are sweet — like Kool-Aid,” says Abbe Hendricks, wine buyer and sommelier at Gateway Market in Des Moines, who says many consumers haven’t yet met Iowa’s drier alternatives. Given a chance, she says, cold-climate grapes are able to distinguish themselves.

“Put a wine from each category in front of someone by itself, and they will 90 percent of the time choose the non-Iowa wine,” says Hendricks. “Do the same experiment with a plate of food, and I’m putting my money on the Iowa wine.”

Hendricks thinks cold-climate grapes stand out with food because they have a better balance of acid and sugar as well as an earthiness that complements food well. “There is enough fruit to make the wine drinkable on its own. But there are more layers than just fruit, which helps to pair the wine with the multiple layers you often find in a meal.” In addition to tree fruit and citrus notes, she says, cold-climate wines offer hints of honey, white flowers, and earthy characteristics, which offer diverse matching points to food.

Despite their advantage when properly paired with cuisine, Iowa wines have not convinced most chefs
and sommeliers. “They aren’t a guaranteed sale,” says Hendricks. “Unless you have a staff that is 100 percent bought into the wine — and can sell it — then the wine will sit collecting dust.”

Iowa wine producers trudge forward, focusing on food and education. “There’s nothing romantic or dramatic about it,” says Bob Wersen of Tassel Ridge Winery. “We’re just going out and getting one new customer at a time.”

Wersen says the wine drinkers at opposite ends of the experience spectrum present the greatest challenges: “those who have never tasted wine and those who are knowledgeable vinophiles.”

Tassel Ridge is designed as an educational center, explains Wersen, who staffs his winery with a chef for food-pairing events and publishes a quarterly magazine with recipes and pairing suggestions to aid Tassel Ridge’s educational efforts. “Most Iowans, when it comes to wine, don’t know what they like,” he says.

To meet the challenge, Wersen and his team have developed a tasting map to help steer wine drinkers through both the winery’s products and their own palates. Where to start? “Taste,” says Wersen. “We start generally in the middle for inexperienced wine drinkers. We watch people’s reactions and often meander in a sweeter direction, though some individuals naturally prefer a drier product.”

Some savvy wine drinkers have been taken aback by the distinct flavors of Wersen’s cold-climate wines. He tells a story of a woman who did a double take after trying his Edelweiss, which carries distinct pineapple notes. “What’s wrong with this wine?” she asked. When Wersen explained the grape, she took another taste and decided she quite liked it.

“It’s easy to say that the problem is Iowa wine,” says Wersen of the encounter. “In fact, it’s perception.”

Grape Expectations

Monica Berry of Cedar Ridge Winery says knowledgeable staff is key to influencing perception, and she finds that talking visitors through what to expect in Cedar Ridge’s wines helps win over customers. Out-of-staters respond to the whites, which Berry explains have bright, tropical fruit flavors and a pleasing aroma. “Cold-climate reds can be a little thinner-bodied and fruitier,” Berry tells tasters.

Knowing what to expect seems to break the ice — many tasters find themselves pleased with the profile. Variety also does its part to win potential customers. Berry says Cedar Ridge produces 26 wines: “Everything from a super-dry Chardonnay to a super-sweet Moscato or port.”

And then there’s quality: Cedar Ridge’s 2010 Marechal Foch was the first Iowa wine

Despite climate and palate challenges, Iowa’s wine industry continues to grow. Cold-climate grapes, like Marechal Foch (top right), can produce balanced wines that complement food well, says Gateway Market’s Abbe Hendricks (right).
the Dick Peterson Best Iowa Appellation Award with its Frontenac Rosé, and Winneshiek Wildberry Winery earned Best Fruit Wine with its Cranberry Crush.

To signal quality in the wine aisle, the Iowa Wine Growers Association, in partnership with Iowa State University Extension’s Midwest Grape and Wine Industry Institute, created the Iowa Quality Wine Consortium (IQWC) in December 2011. The program encourages the production of higher-quality wine and assists Iowa wineries in their effort to become competitive in the Iowa market against national and international wines. The Consortium conducts laboratory chemical analysis and sensory evaluation to determine which wines are worthy of the IQWC seal. Lab analyses test for alcohol content, volatile acids, sulfur dioxide, and cold stability. Sensory evaluation by qualified professionals rates wines on appearance and color, aroma/varietal character, flavor, balance, and absence of faults using a 20-point scale. To date, the Consortium has recognized 77 wines from a dozen Iowa wineries with the seal.

“Based on our observations, we notice that the wines are improving,” says Dr. Murli Dharmadhikari, Extension enologist and director of the Midwest Grape and Wine Industry Institute at Iowa State University. “Our vineyards are young and our grapes are new. It’s a young and growing industry figuring out how the grapes behave in this climate. We can’t compete on price and are trying to build a regional identity of Iowa wine.”

Dharmadhikari’s observations lead him to believe that aromatic whites, sparkling wines, and reds utilizing the Marquette grape show the most potential to distinguish themselves within Iowa’s wine industry. He hopes to improve the IQWC’s educational component to better inform consumers — and to help them value quality in the wine aisle.

For Hendricks, the proof may be not in the lab but in the pudding — or whichever food is skillfully paired with the grape. Quality wine in hand, she offers a few suggestions to find a wine-and-food match made in Iowa.

to garner a 90-point rating (translation: exceptional) from the Beverage Tasting Institute in Chicago. With public interest piqued by the score’s validation of Iowa-produced wine, Cedar Ridge sold out of the vintage in a week and made quick work of moving the wine the next year as well.

Other Iowa wineries have tasted success. Thirty-five Iowa wines earned gold medals in the 2012 Mid-American Wine Competition held in Ankeny last July. Iowa wineries garnered six gold medals for food pairings. Garden Winery won

As consumers become more familiar with grapes grown in the state, such as Vignoles (right), Iowa wines have the opportunity to distinguish themselves. Those submitting to stringent evaluation (Research Associate Jennie Savits, opposite top, measures alcohol content) may earn a quality seal.
She recommends accompanying oven-roasted chicken with John Ernest Mainline Red and grilled Iowa pork chops with White Oak Vineyards White Oak Red. Penoach Picket Fence White, says Hendricks, is a solid accompaniment to a goat cheese omelet, and Snus Hill Frontenac Port sidles up to blue cheese with aplomb. And for dessert, Hendricks suggests chocolate cake with Snus Hill Sven Red or New York cheesecake with Cedar Ridge St. Pepin.

A little tasting and exploration is sure to open both minds and palates of Iowa wine drinkers. And the language used to describe them is becoming more familiar: quality, food-friendly, award-winning. With first-rate native wines, foods that showcase them, and a program designed to promote them, Iowa wine drinkers have plenty to talk about.

**high scorers**

The IQWC offers two seals, which appear on qualified wine bottles just above the right corner of the wine's label. The Iowa Quality Wine seal denotes qualifying wines made from a minimum of 75 percent Iowa-grown grapes. A second designation, the Quality Wine seal, is reserved for qualifying wines made from less than 75 percent Iowa-grown grapes, other fruits, and/or other winemaking materials. Visit extension.iastate.edu/wine/projects/page/iowa-quality-wine-consortium.

**GRAPE TRANSLATIONS**

More online at iowan.com, where Gateway's Abbe Hendricks offers cold-climate alternatives to familiar wine varieties. Cheers!