



A TASTE OF WINE ALONG MICHIGAN'S SHORELINE

By Traci Rhoades

Where I come from, Michigan is synonymous with two words: cold and snow. So, this past year as I set out to explore my new state with my new husband, I had no idea what to expect. A most pleasant surprise, what we discovered had nothing to do with cold or snow (of course, winter does always arrive eventually).

In early spring, while dining at a local restaurant, we discovered one of Michigan's best-kept secrets when we bought our first bottle of Michigan wine. Michigan has a thriving group of wine producers and I had no idea. The majority of these grape growers call the peninsulas around Grand Traverse Bay home. The fertile soils in and around the Old Mission and Leelanau Peninsulas produce some exceptional wines. After tasting several of these wines, we decided to spend a long weekend in the Northwestern part of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, the Grand Traverse Bay area, going straight to the vineyard sources.

According to *Michigan Wine Country*, an annual magazine featuring wineries in the state published by the Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council (free publication copies are available at www.michiganwines.com), the two peninsulas in the Northwestern part of Michigan's lower peninsula house more than 15 vineyards and wineries. Although we awoke to overcast, drizzly, freezing weather (but no snow), nothing

thwarted our goal of visiting as many wineries as we could in one weekend. For the first leg of our trip, we drove up Old Mission Peninsula to taste the products of its vineyards.

We stopped first at *Peninsula Cellars*, where the tasting room is set up in an old schoolhouse. The rows of grape vines rolled casually down a hill and exhibited an European descent compared to the very American farmlands surrounding us on all sides. At home, we frequent a wine retailer, G&M Mercantile, who opened shop in Oxford, MI in November of last year. It was from this retailer we learned that *Peninsula Cellars* recently won an award internationally for its 2002 Riesling, a “Best White Wine: Also World Riesling Champion.” The winery received the award a few months before and, although it has sold out of the prizewinner, the plaque stands proudly on display in the tasting room. Actually, much to our disappointment, most of the wines that had won various statewide and national awards were no longer available. Still, we tasted some wonderful white wines and an interesting port; a mixture of red wine and brandy.

The first bottle of Michigan wine my husband and I shared was a late harvest Riesling from *Chateau Grand Traverse*, our next stop. The tasting room sits on a large hill, offering picturesque views of the waters below. We visited *Chateau Grand Traverse* at the same time as many other people. Although the fireplace in the middle of the tasting room seemed inviting, the numbers of bustling people and our desire to taste the fine wines won out over relaxation. However, the workers felt no need to hurry. *Chateau Grand Traverse* has won a fair share of awards and those offering tastes of the product exhibited great pride in the wines. They shared numerous interesting facts about the vineyards and its finest vintages while we tasted. Here, we found a very interesting cranberry Riesling; mixing our favorite wine with a Thanksgiving dinner favorite, this wine would surely to be a hit around the holidays.

Our next stop was *Bowers Harbor Vineyards*, a winery unfamiliar to us. The sign welcoming visitors told us the owners had established the vineyards in 1991. We entered the tast-

ing room through a storage area and immediately received greetings from two large dogs; Cooper and Otis. We won't soon forget their names because we brought home wines with names bearing homage to the pets. Cooper and Otis seem to be this winery's trademark. They definitely enjoy entertaining the masses and wander around from room to room freely. **Bowers Harbor** was a smaller winery and played the quaintness to its advantage. Its friendly workers welcomed the opportunity to chat with you, all the while rubbing a dog's ear or sacking your purchases. Outdoors on a small patio, we toasted our wine touring with a glass of bubbly; handpicked and processed right in the backyard.

The last winery we visited on the Old Mission Peninsula, **Chateau Chantal**, had a view that surpassed any around the rest of the peninsula, if that's possible. The driveway leading up to the tasting room and bed and breakfast inn winds up a hill to the highest point of the peninsula, which overlooks Grand Traverse Bay. Fields of vinery run along either side of the road as guests make their way up to a large Italian-style villa. We toured **Chateau Chantal** on customer appreciation day, so we found ourselves a little lost among the many groups of people. We waited about ten minutes before elbowing our way up to the bar for a tasting. **Chateau Chantal** had a wide selection of wines; its sparkling wines certainly a crowd favorite.

We rounded the bay area and headed up the Leelanau Peninsula to continue our wine tour. By this point, we were wearing down and began to realize that a number of the wineries would have to wait for a return trip. However, we knew of one winery on this peninsula that we definitely didn't want to miss. In addition to excellent wine, **Black Star Farms** makes a wonderful cheese product.

Ciccione was our first stop on the Leelanau Peninsula. We tasted wine amidst a bridal party finalizing that day's wedding preparations. Despite all the other activity, we contentedly went about our individual tasks; the bride dealing with her jitters and last minute details, the rest of us paying special attention to each wine vintage we experienced. **Ciccione** has a limited

selection of fine wines, which suits them and those that have the pleasure of tasting said wines, just fine.

Maybe I still had weddings on the brain, but as we drove up to *Willow Vineyard*, I thought it a perfect location for a wedding. Indeed, once inside, I saw a number of photos of weddings that had taken place on its grounds. A smaller shop, its vineyards seem to drop right off into the blue waters below. *Willow Vineyard* produces four wines, all of which went for a higher price than most bottles at the other local wineries.

In planning the trip, we'd looked forward to visiting *Black Star Farms*. We enjoyed its Arcturus semi-dry Reisling and the farm's Leelanau Aged Raclette Cheese, definitely a wine-friendly food. Although also busy, this winery's product did not disappoint. We arrived at about 4 o'clock in the afternoon and had tasted so many wines throughout the day that we had put off tasting the reds and Chardonnays and tried only the Rieslings. Although *Black Star Farms* produces a number of excellent wines, the semi-dry we had enjoyed at home remained our favorite.

Before moving to Michigan, I had no idea one could spend a whole weekend touring Michigan wineries and not even complete the tour. Since discovering these quality wines made in our own state, we've found a number of retailers in the Detroit suburban area that offer these products. I'm not fooling myself, I do live in Michigan and the snow will come. When it does you'll find me curled up at home, fireside, with a bottle of Michigan wine to help warm me.

Based on the number of award-winning wines we discovered during our weekend to the Grand Traverse Bay area, Michigan continues to make quite a splash among New World Wines. My guess is that Michigan residents won't be able to keep our wines one of Michigan's best-kept secrets much longer. Wine connoisseurs worldwide are certain to learn, through the grapevine of course, about Michigan's wine selections and come seeking a taste of their own.