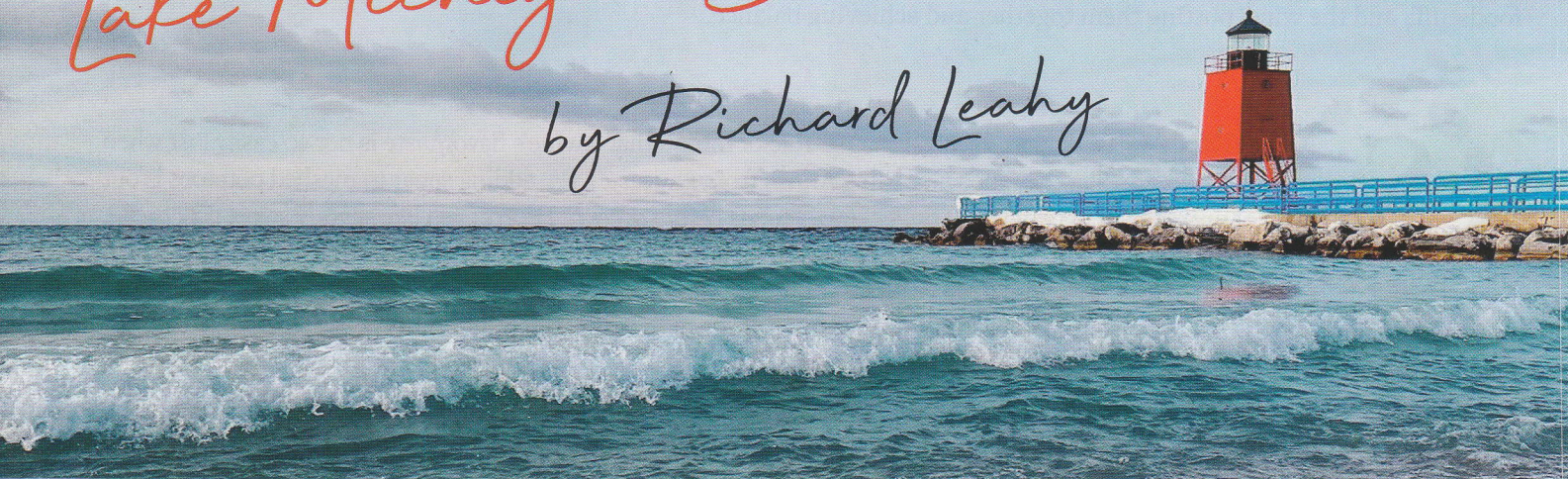


Wines of the Lake Michigan Shore AVA

by Richard Leahy



I enjoyed an end-of-summer vacation in St. Joseph on the east shore of Lake Michigan last year, so I decided to repeat the experience this year. I'm happy to report that my curiosity from last year's initial tastings was satisfied with the quality and potential of the wines from this region. Wineries featured here source their grapes locally within the AVA; some produce only estate-bottled wines.

Thanks to lake effect (prevailing western winds over the deepest part of Lake Michigan), the climate in the southwestern corner (USDA zone 6 a-b) is two weeks longer than that of northwest Michigan (the Leelanau and Old Mission Peninsulas). The Lake Michigan Shore AVA was established in 1983, encompassing the 1.283 million acres of mostly sandy, well-drained soils of the region (the earlier-established Fennville AVA is the northwestern corner of the larger regional one.) The longer growing season allows for the ripening of a wide range of vinifera varieties.



While I expected and tasted a lot of fine, fresh, racy white and rosé wines, I was impressed and even amazed at the range of well-made, stylish red wines, ranging from very fine Pinot Noir to elegant Meritage to a very juicy, full-bodied and decadent Cabernet-Shiraz blend.

Tourism is a big business in the region, with Chicago being a 90-minute to two-hour drive away. Millicent Huminsky of the Southwest Michigan Tourism Council confirms that the number of wineries in the area more than doubled in the decade from 2006-2016, from 8 to 20, and that breweries, cideries and distilleries are also popping up to diversify the local beverage scene.



WHITE PINE WINERY

While staying at the elegant Boulevard Inn & Bistro in St. Joseph, I walked to the tasting room of White Pine Winery, founded by Dr. Dave Miller and his wife Sandy. “Dr. Dave” earned his Ph.D. in viticulture under Stan Howell at Michigan State U. and then served as his technician and winemaker at MSU’s research winery, before taking a job at St. Julian Winery, Michigan’s oldest and largest winery, as assistant winemaker. In 1999 Dave and Sandy planted “Sophie’s Vineyard” in Lawton, named after their daughter Sophie.

Tasting Highlights:

Reserve Riesling 2017 (semi-dry)

Nose: WOW! Ripe peach and apricot.

Palate: zesty ripe peach and apricot with great fruit/acid balance; juicy and fresh! Very hedonistic.

Lady Slipper 2017 Dry Chambourcin Rosé

Color: vivid dark pink.

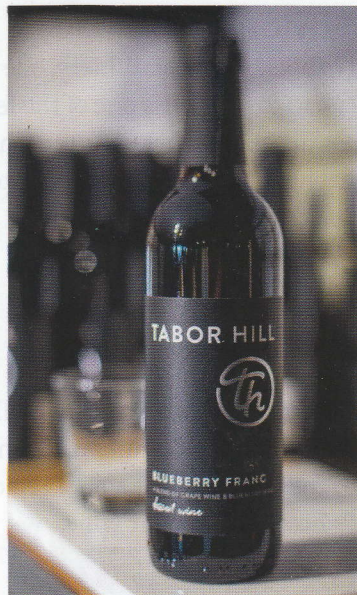
Nose: a party! Fresh cherry and strawberry!

Palate: fresh, vibrant, clean, white/red cherry, watermelon
PERFECT summer sipping or food dry rosé.

Cabernet Franc Reserve 2017 (Berrien Co.)

Nose: nice fresh bright red cherry.

Palate: vibrant fruit, some strawberry, fresh clean finish. Great warm weather cabernet franc to serve slightly chilled.



Tabor Hill Tasting Highlights

Pinot Noir 2017

Nose: baking spices, black cherry and forest floor.

Palate: chewy, solid black cherry fruit, a big volume, firm tannins, great fruit/acid balance, crisp fresh finish. Impressive.

Albariño 2018

Nose: still a bit closed, fresh, hints of grapefruit and white flowers, lime and mineral.

Palate: chewy, full-bodied, bold, vibrant white grapefruit, zesty lemon pith, young, high acid but fruit balances it and classic varietal style.

Blueberry Franc NV This is a fun, original blend of mature Cabernet Franc port and fresh, fruity blueberry wine.

Nose: spicy, dried cherry from the Cabernet Franc, with loads of pepper and spice, then fresh blueberry.

Palate: spicy red fruits, loads of pepper and spice, then finishes with some fresh blueberry on top of peppery tawny-like texture. Original, intriguing.



TABOR HILL VINEYARDS

My first stop the next day was with Brian Carlson, the winemaker for the Moersch Hospitality Group which includes Tabor Hill (the oldest winery in the region), Round Barn and Free Run, a very small lot producer focused on dry mostly-vinifera wines. We focused on the wines of Tabor Hill which are mostly dry to semi-sweet. Although Brian has only two vintages in Michigan under his belt (he spent many years making wine in the Walla Walla AVA of Washington), it was clear that he understands the chemistry and stylistic limitations of cool climate grapes, both red and white.

HICKORY CREEK WINERY

Adam McBride is owner/winemaker of Hickory Creek Winery, one of the smallest wineries in the region (1,500 cases). He is one of the few people doing varietal Gruner Veltliner in the area, but his strength is with dry reds. One of the reasons is that he gets nice ripe, concentrated fruit and uses large, mostly neutral oak to age them in.

Tasting Highlights

Chambourcin 2017

Nose: lifted plum and blackberry aromas.

Palate: rich, spicy black fruits, more spice and concentration "like Syrah" says Adam; a serious, brooding full-bodied Chambourcin that has and handles new French oak; to me it drank like a cool region (Mendocino?) Zinfandel. He says it's his most popular wine.

Merlot 2017

Color: Bright medium garnet

Nose: fragrant red and black fruits, mostly cherries.

Palate: VERY lively red cherries, bursting with flavor and acidity, exceptional fruit/acid balance, fresh clean finish.

LEMON CREEK WINERY

Jeff and Kathy Lemon operate Lemon Creek Winery, which is one of the oldest in the area (1984) with 17 acres of vines. They say their dry reds are the most popular ones with their clientele, and remark that across the state wine quality with reds has improved markedly in the last five years. While the quality at Lemon Creek is consistently high, they specialize in reds and are making some of the best that I've had in the region.

Tasting Highlights:

Unoaked Chardonnay 2017

Nose: bright fresh lemon, gentle and subtle.

Palate: round, fresh, dry but pretty and feminine, flavors of light fresh apple. Stylish.

Sauvignon Blanc 2017

Nose: gentle hint of gooseberry, white flowers.

Palate: dry, zesty, firm acidity, drinks like Loire Valley style, flavors of lemon and mineral, fresh clean finish.

Cabernet Sauvignon/Shiraz 2017 (60% C.S., 40% Shiraz)

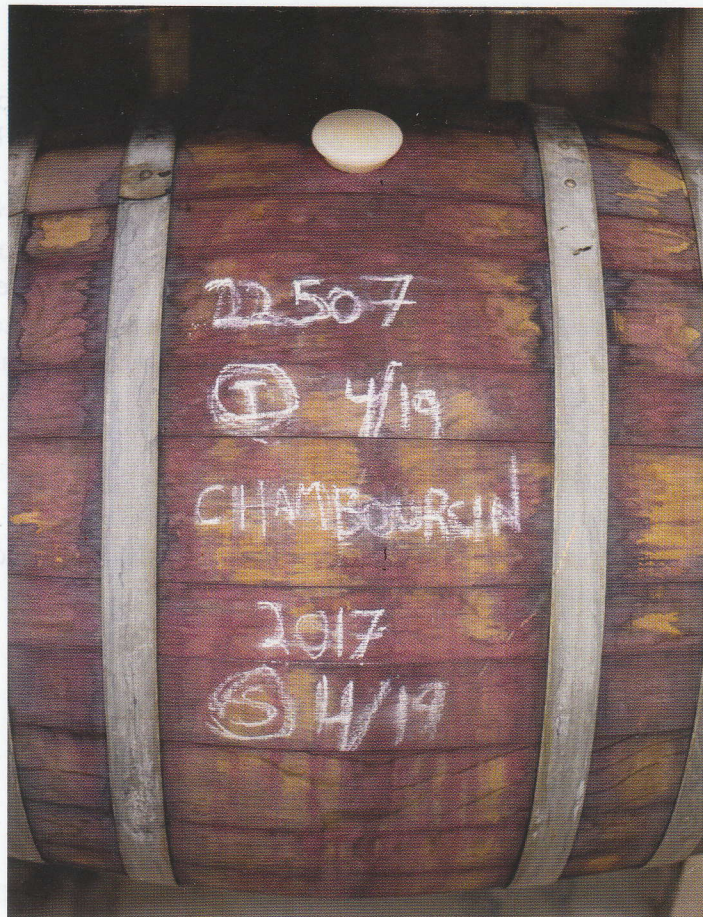
Nose: Wow; big New World style of ripe black fruits; spicy black cherry and black cassis; a party in a glass!

Palate: Peppery! Big, juicy dry, spicy, bold, but not over-oaked (Jeff used 1 new barrel for each grape). A double gold medal winner.

Cabernet Sauvignon 2017 Barrel Select

Nose: Pure black cassis, with spice and black pepper.

Palate: chewy, spicy, still fresh and lively, black pepper.



DABLON WINERY AND VINEYARDS

This winery was named for Claude Dablon, a Jesuit missionary and one of the first European explorers in 17th century Michigan, although the operation sports an impressively contemporary tasting room and winery. They acquired 44 acres of land on one of the highest points in Baroda, and began planting grapes, and now have 36 acres of estate-grown grapes planted on their 75-acre farm. The winery has been open since 2015 and their website says they “combine Old World techniques with New World methodologies.” Dablon grows perhaps the most diverse selection of vinifera grapes in the region. Reds run the gamut from Pinot Noir to the spectrum of six red Bordeaux grapes (the three majors plus Carmenere, Malbec and Petit Verdot), Tannat and Syrah. The white wines are also an eclectic mix with Chardonnay (steel and oak versions), Riesling, Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir rosé and include strong hybrids like Seyval Blanc and Traminette.

Tasting Highlights:

Pinot Noir Rosé 2017

Color: 18-hour skin contact, nice med. dark garnet.

Nose: fresh watermelon and strawberry, bright fresh fruit.

Palate: dry, bright, vibrant, intense strawberry and red cherry, a food rosé, classy!

Malbec 2016

Color: Purple garnet

Nose: fresh boysenberry, fruit-driven.

Palate: same flavor, broad spicy/vibrant fresh red fruits and briar fruits in a cool climate style.

Estate Red Blend 2015 A Cab. Sauv.-dominated Meritage-style blend. 24 months in oak.

Nose: black cassis, licorice, black pepper.

Palate: fresh, lively, good fruit/acid balance, ripe black fruits and lively tannins. Still young but bright, fresh and promising.

Cabernet Sauvignon 2016

Color: Garnet

Nose: A “Left Bank” style of cassis, black fruits and leafy herbal

Palate: Juicy! Smooth and vibrant cassis, red/black cherry, with nice concentration and ripe tannins, lively zesty finish like a Mozart piano piece. Stylish.

Syrah 2016

Color: Dark garnet

Nose: brilliant northern Rhone-style: gamey, bacon, white pepper and spicy red cherry.

Palate: dry, vibrant with white pepper red cherry and lively fresh finish. Clean and impressive New World interpretation of an Old-World classic.

FREE RUN CELLARS

Free Run Cellars is the small production, artisanal label in the Moersch Hospitality Group of wineries. Total case production is about 1,000 cases and most labels are in 50-case lots. Brian Carlson again guided me on a tasting.

Tasting Highlights:

Round Barn Sauvignon Blanc 2018

Nose: racy, lively passion fruit and citrus, not as intense or grassy as the New Zealand style but still lively.

Palate: zesty, fresh, loads of lemon/citrus and grapefruit, lively, very terroir-driven.

Free Run Pinot Meunier Dry Rosé

Color: Bright watermelon

Nose: A party! Red cherries, strawberries, watermelon, cranberries and a hint of smoke.

Palate: juicy watermelon, strawberry and cherry with bright lively acidity; a winner and a fun way to showcase this overlooked non-tannic red grape.

Free Run Meritage 2017 (mostly Cabernet Franc, 30% Merlot, some Cab. Sauv.)

Color: Dark ruby

Nose: large volume; lots of black fruits, some new oak, spice.

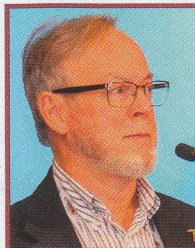
Palate: Large! Chewy tannins, cherry/chocolate, fresh finish.

GOOD AND BAD NEWS FOR LAKE MICHIGAN WINERIES IN 2019

Unfortunately, a polar vortex in 2018/19 brought several days of temperatures lower than -20° F to the region. Most vintners report losses of at least 70% of their potential 2019 crop. Domaine Berrien was one of the few who buried their cordons under snow, and the buds survived, so they have a crop. Kathy Lemon reports that this was the third polar vortex in five years, though none of the others was as damaging as in 2019. Accordingly, the local wine industry will have to explore ways of preparing for what seem to be all-too-frequent polar vortices with serious impact on the future crop.

Meanwhile, from classic dry vinifera wines to sweet hybrids and even wine slushies, there's a satisfying wine or two for every palate in Southwest Michigan made from local grapes. Add to that the many complementary tourist attractions from beaches to dunes, art festivals, sailing, golfing, etc. and the close proximity to Chicago (and, for this author, the refreshingly moderate temperatures and humidity), and there are lots of reasons to visit the region and its wineries.

*All photos (except lighthouse) in this article shot by Joshua Nowicki and courtesy of swmichigan.org.



About the Author

Richard Leahy is the author of *Beyond Jefferson's Vines, the Evolution of Quality Wine in Virginia*, now in its third edition. He also is Conference Manager for the Eastern Winery Exposition. His blog on eastern wines is www.richardleahy.com/blog.