

# The United States of Wine

The race to become the next Napa Valley is on. Our reporter on wine tourism's surprising new destinations.

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Winemakers in Missouri are excited about Norton, a grape they call the "Cabernet of the Midwest." One Wyoming vineyard is making a robust red from the Valiant grape -- it's supposed to pair well with bison. Even in Iowa, where demand for ethanol has caused a boom in corn prices, some farmers are replanting fields with grapevines.

SEE AN INTERACTIVE GRAPHIC 

## OFF THE BEATEN VINE



The remarkable expansion of wineries to unlikely places has now touched all 50 states, including Alaska. It's also reached the point where some of these regions are vying for Napa-like status. Among the emerging hotspots: Texas and Idaho. It's not all novelty wines made from local produce, either. In Arizona, a state better known for chimichangas than Chardonnay, serious winemakers are producing some surprisingly good whites.

To separate the amateur efforts from the labels worth shipping home, we visited dozens of tasting rooms across the country. We came across lots of interesting choices, including

a \$100 Cabernet made from grapes grown 30 miles northwest of Chicago and an Arizona red that its maker suggests pairing with "scorpion, tarantula and rattlesnake meat" (Elgin Winery's \$11 Tombstone Red). Some were truly awful, but others could hold their own against established California brands. One expert taster raved about a \$30 Cabernet blend from Plum Creek Winery in Colorado.

Last year, wine tourists spent \$3 billion sniffing, swirling and spitting in buckets across the U.S. (The figure includes travel costs, lodging and tours but not wine purchases.) There are 5,110 wineries in the country -- 1,773 outside of California, Washington, Oregon and New York, according to the U.S. Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau -- and many of them are new.

In Texas, 24 wineries opened in 2006, up one-third in just one year, says industry-tracking firm Wines and Vines. Last year, Colorado went from 48 wineries to 70. North Carolina added 18 last year, including Rock of Ages Winery in Hurdle Mills, which grows 17 varietals from Syrah to Sangiovese. Last week, the winery inaugurated its annual Cork and Pork festival.

## TRIP PLANNER



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[See where to stay and eat](#)<sup>3</sup> near some little known -- but often surprisingly good -- wineries in the U.S.

Further off the path, Montana's 10 wineries grow lesser-known varietals like Maréchal Foch and Leon Millot. The grapes may be imported from other states -- some of Louisiana's six wineries get their grapes from the Texas Panhandle -- or they may not appear in the wine at all. Most of Maine's five wineries focus on "vineless" wines using apples and blueberries, while Alaska, with five wineries, is home to tipples made from local salmonberries, birch sap and dandelions.



Pointing the way to Reeder Mesa Vineyards in Whitewater, Colo.

Still, many states are producing more "serious" stuff, often from the same grapes grown in France or California. Wine Spectator magazine, which uses a 100-point scale, has awarded wines from Texas, Virginia and Pennsylvania ratings of 90 and 91, or "outstanding." In Chicago, Charlie Trotter's serves an Illinois Cabernet Sauvignon alongside bottles from 23 other states including Minnesota, Kentucky and Kansas.

States are pushing wine tourism hard, to boost the local economy. The Texas wine industry contributes more than \$1 billion a year to the state's economy and supports about 8,000 jobs for Texans, according to a 2007 Texas Wine and Grape Growers Association report. In North Carolina, a 2006 study found that the state's wineries were attracting 800,000 tourists annually and generating \$122 million a year.

To draw in travelers' dollars, states like Indiana and Minnesota have recently launched official wine trail routes; Maryland will introduce its first in June. Beyond marketing, Florida's department of agriculture is reimbursing growers \$1,000 an acre to start their own vineyards. Other subsidies are helping: Over the past five years, the USDA's agricultural development agency has awarded more than \$30 million in grants and loans to states to help develop their wine industries.



Bottles from (left to right) Connecticut, Tennessee and Arizona.

Growers can make good profits. In Iowa, an acre of grapes can yield more than \$1,500 a year -- about 10 times more than an acre of corn, even with the recent boom in ethanol demand, says Michael White, a viticulture specialist at Iowa State University. But startup costs are steep: It takes five years before grapes are in full production, and many farmers who do make the switch are not prepared for the intensity of labor required. In the Midwest, where grapes are harvested manually, one acre of grapes requires about 200 hours of labor per year, while corn only requires about an hour and a half per acre. Brian Cochran, owner of the six-year-old Dakota Hills Winery in Knox, N.D., used to be a dairy farmer but gave it up because it was too physically demanding. (His is one of three wineries in North Dakota, which has the lowest rate of wine consumption of any state.) Now he makes wine from plants like jostaberries and rhubarb, as well as from estate-grown grapes like Elvira and Fontenac. Mr. Cochran says he's turning a profit on par with what he was making in dairy, but adds: "This turned out to be pretty demanding, too."

Visitors to these emerging destinations run the gamut: Rhode Island is marketing its wine trail to group tour operators and making sure that wineries have space for buses to park in front. Texas, which grows traditional French grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, has attracted more serious connoisseurs, some of whom are searching for the next great undiscovered label. And in already touristy spots like Florida, Arizona and Hawaii, tasting rooms are crowded with vacationers who want for a break from the sun -- or just an excuse to start drinking before noon. The personalities behind the wineries vary as well. We met owners who had left or retired from careers in criminal law, technology and medicine to pursue a passion for wine.

Back in New York, we tasted more than two dozen bottles from our travels with a panel that included Ralph Hersom, owner of Ralph's Wine and Spirits in Rye, N.Y., and former wine director at Manhattan's Le Cirque 2000. We tasted blind, throwing in a few California wines to see how they'd compare. Here are highlights from the trip:

## Colorado

**The Scene:** Wild horses, rebel vintners

**What They Grow:** Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Syrah

Colorado's 30-mile-long Grand Valley, a four-hour drive west from Denver, is the anti-Napa: Tastings are free, hotels aren't deluxe and in Palisade, Colo., where most of the wineries are clustered, we found only one restaurant open for dinner. There, tourists can pedal between tasting rooms that sell religious figurines, fudge and honey mead. Farther afield, DeBeque Canyon and Canyon Wind Cellars, both on the banks of the Colorado River, make full-bodied reds.

Winemaker Jeff Carr of Garfield Estates says he picked Grand Valley as the antithesis of California's commercialization and crowds. When we pulled in, a "closed" sign was hanging outside the 100-year-old barn-turned-winery, though the tasting room was open. "We're hard to find by design," says Mr. Carr, who started the winery in 2000 with a colleague from Netscape after both sold stock options. On our visit, we sampled a limited edition of "Lagniappe Blanc," a dry table wine made from Muscat grapes, which are used for dessert wines.

In New York, our expert taster said the Garfield Estates Fume Blanc lacked the grassy, citrusy tastes of its base grape, Sauvignon Blanc. Mr. Hersom called it light and incomplete -- "little more than flavored water," he said. (Mr. Carr says the Fume Blanc style may have been different from what Mr. Hersom was expecting.)

But he detected smoky notes and "old-world style" in a bottle of Plum Creek Winery's 2001 Grand Mesa (\$30), a blend of Cabernet, Cabernet Franc and Merlot. "I'd sell that," he said.

## Tennessee

**The Scene:** Sweet Southern hospitality, sweeter wine

**What They Grow:** Concord (Mmmm, Welch's) and giant Muscadine



**Southern comfort:**  
Country singer Kix Brooks, whose Tennessee winery opens next month.

Tennessee might be better known for its whiskey, but over the past five years a slew of winemakers have started experimenting with California and European varietals. Country singer Kix Brooks of Brooks and Dunn is opening a winery called Arrington Vineyards next month in Arrington, Tenn., just south of Nashville, where he'll be selling dry, California-style wines to appeal to residents in one of the 15 wealthiest counties in the country.

"I'm from Louisiana so I've been drinking for a long time," he says. But, he adds, he only got into wine 10 years ago after he started going out West. (He discovered Lafite Rothschild when Tim McGraw and Faith Hill gave him several bottles for Christmas a few years ago.)

But with alcohol sales still prohibited in many counties -- Lynchburg-Moore County, home to the Jack Daniel's distillery, is dry -- vintners say many Tennesseans prefer sweeter blends. On our trip, which began in Nashville and looped through the gorgeous Cumberland Plateau, the state's self-proclaimed golf capital, we visited 10 wineries and watched fellow tasters skip the dry stuff. Popular choices include sweet wine made from golf-ball sized Muscadine grapes, orange-flavored theme wines (for anti-Florida football fans, there's Holly Ridge's Gator Hater) and drinks from Concord grapes, which one producer called "communion juice with a kick."

Explains Curtis Wallin, owner of Holly Ridge Vineyards in Livingston, Tenn.: "I don't care much for sweet wines. But I do like the way they ring the cash register."

After a palate-cleansing interlude of pulled pork, we pulled into Sumner Crest, a winery behind a Shell station. Assistant manager Jimmie Jacobs pointed us toward her best seller, a blackberry wine she assured us wouldn't be too sweet because it was made with tart berries. It was, in fact, less syrupy than the Colorado cherry wine, but our tasters said they could find better use for blackberries. Said one: "I'd rather have mine in pie."

## Connecticut

**The Scene:** Napa without the traffic

**What They Grow:** Chardonnay and Vidal Blanc

Maybe the wine trail is one of Connecticut's best-kept secrets, or maybe we were the only ones crazy enough to sprint around the state tasting wine in the stormy weather last month. Either way, we were happy to have the tasting rooms and hiking trails around Lake Waramaug to ourselves.



Visitors on the patio at Priam Vineyards in Colchester, Conn.

The state's 15 wineries are divided into eastern and western trails. While the wine board doesn't recommend cramming each trail into one day, we discovered that it's possible, thanks to bright blue wine trail signs off of every exit ramp and a comprehensive guide offered at every winery, with directions and recommended lodgings.

Starting on the eastern trail just east of New Haven, Conn., our first stop was Bishop's Orchards, whose offerings include an apple-pear blend called Happily Impeared. But Chardonnay is what the state grows best, and most wineries have started making versions aged in stainless steel and oak. The state also produces a range of citrusy white varietals like Vidal Blanc, many of which go well with the local shellfish sold at bare-bones seafood shacks or upscale oyster bars.

When it comes to reds, many vintners make their wines with out-of-state grapes -- a practice common around the country, as new wineries wait for their own vines to mature. In North Stonington, Conn., the five-year-old Jonathan Edwards Winery makes Zinfandels and Syrahs with juice from Napa.

We were more intrigued by Jonathan Edwards's "cult wine": Its estate-grown Gewürztraminer has amassed such a following that this year's batch of 60 cases was sold out at \$19 per bottle before it was released earlier this month. We tasted last year's vintage and while we thought it was a good, drier-style Gewürztraminer, we didn't see what all the fuss was about.

## Illinois

**The Scene:** Wine in the burbs

**What They Grow:** Norton, disease-resistant Chambourcin

Lynfred Winery, which was founded in 1979 and is Illinois's largest and longest continually operating winery, looks a lot like a European chateau, with stained-glass windows, chandeliers and four luxurious suites for overnight guests. The view from the balcony: Not vineyards, but a busy intersection just off the freeway, 15 minutes from Chicago O'Hare. "If only they could pick it up and move it somewhere else," says 49-year-old Diane Shurtleff of Wheaton, Ill., a recent visitor who works for a Christian book publisher.

We felt the same about the entire Northern Illinois Wine Trail, created last year, which leads visitors to some lovely tasting rooms but requires hours of driving through industrial parks and bleak prairie roads. Two of the northern region's more classic-looking vineyards -- Galena Vineyards in Galena, and the four-year-old Massbach Ridge in nearby Elizabeth, both on a scenic stretch of the Mississippi River -- are three hours by car from Chicago.

The new wine trail's proximity to Chicago is a blessing for locals, but a disappointment for those hoping for a weekend escape. The last stop on the trail, two-year-old Cooper's Hawk Winery and Restaurant in Orland Park, Ill., was a mob scene on a recent Friday night: At least a dozen people were angling for spots at the long tasting room bar in front (eight tastings cost \$7) and there was a 90-minute wait for a table for two at the bistro. First-timer Mamie Tolbert, a 42-year-old teacher in Chicago, had come with three friends for a birthday celebration. After their first taste, a generous pour of Sauvignon Blanc made with grapes from California, two of the women winced. "This tastes like cologne," Ms. Tolbert says.

Our expert had a similar response when he tried a bottle we'd brought back from Valentino Vineyards in Long Grove, Ill., owned by former racecar driver Rudy Valentino di Tommaso. He described his Ventura as a robust, unfiltered dry white made from a Canadian grape of the same name. "It goes great with a bratwurst," he says, adding it's popular with beer drinkers. Mr. Hersom, however, took one sniff, inspected the wine's "funky, golden color," and declared it "flawed" -- oxidized like Sherry, and tough to swallow. (Mr. di Tommaso says the Ventura doesn't travel well, and would have fared better had we let it settle for several weeks and then decanted it.)

## Arizona



Mark Peterman

**The Scene:** Red rocks, winemaking rock stars

**What They Grow:** Syrah, Merlot, Cabernet

Our expert was sure it was from California: A textbook Chardonnay with a nice nose and a long palate, he said, it would be a possible contender for a double gold medal in competition. It was actually from Alcantara Vineyards, a brand-new winery near a trailer park on the outskirts of small town Cottonwood, Ariz.

The grapes at Echo Canyon in Sedona, Ariz.

To our surprise, Arizona wines topped nearly every category in our tasting, beating even the California ringers. Page Springs's \$20 *Vino de la Familia Blanca* 2005, made from 100% Arizona-grown Malvasia Bianca, trumped the \$34 *Conundrum*, a white from California, grown the same year. The *Rancho Rossa Syrah* we bought at Cave Creek Wines, a four-year-old wine store and tasting room in a strip mall 20 miles north of downtown Phoenix, was the best of the 13 reds we tried

(big and complex, with explosive fruit). Two wines from Echo Canyon in Sedona, Ariz. -- a Syrah and a big, jammy red blend called "Triad" -- were close behind.

We were lucky to find them. The wine industry in Northern Arizona centers around Sedona, a high-altitude area with dramatic temperature swings and rich volcanic soils. Wineries are sprouting up so quickly that tourist boards and mapmakers haven't kept up, and neither Alcantara Vineyards nor Page Springs Cellars were on the Arizona Wine Growers Association's online wine trail map. But seek and ye shall find: Jon Marcus, vintner at the hard-to-find Echo Canyon, says he'll open a bottle for anyone who braves the treacherous two-mile dirt road to his 32-acre estate, which he says neighbors the property of Sen. John McCain.

Another of the region's elusive wines is being made by Maynard James Keenan, the lead singer of rock band Tool. Mr. Keenan doesn't have his own tasting room but his label -- called Caduceus -- is sold at Page Springs Cellars, where vintner Eric Glomsky helps him produce it. Mr. Keenan describes one of the wines as tasting like "cherries from the planet Krypton." When we visited, Page Springs had been sold out of the wine for months. Bottles are back on the shelves now, for \$69.69 and \$49.99.

For many wine tourists, the thrill is in the chase. Last month Dan and Judi Kvachuk were driving along Page Springs Road, south of Sedona, when they stumbled on a winery called Javelina Leap. Owner Rod Snapp is just getting it up and running -- he's still waiting for his vines to mature, and his open-air tasting room is open only on weekends -- but he invited the retired Salt Lake City couple inside for a weekday cellar tour. Mr. Snapp opened a bottle of Zinfandel he makes from grapes grown in Paso Robles, Calif., and the threesome emerged an hour and a half later, having finished the bottle. "We didn't want to leave," Ms. Kvachuk says.

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