

# Rules put squeeze on Illinois wine

By KURT BEGALKA

kbegalka@nwnewsgroup.com

Illinois residents enjoy a good glass of wine.

According to the latest statistics available, in 2006 we drank 26 million gallons of the stuff – with Chicago ranking among the top national markets. And 844,372 gallons of wine in the marketplace was home grown.

According to the Illinois Grape Growers and Vintners Association Illinois is now home to 77 wineries and trending toward 90 by 2010. Growth of the industry is increasing at more than 22 percent annually. We had just 14 wineries in 1997.

In recent years the industry has begun to take root in McHenry County, as well.

"If you look at any fence line, they are growing. No matter how much you prune, you can't kill it," said Heather Matteson, in charge of the family owned Back Venti Vineyard in Harvard. "[Raising grapes] is something we love to do. We're all kind of outdoorsy people and it is a stress reliever for all of us."

But turning wild grapes into a viable cash crop for wine, is no easy feat. Sure, grapes thrive on marginal soils. Properly pruned and protected from pests, their deep tap roots make them drought resistant. But temperature is another matter.

Bill Shoemaker, superintendent of the University of Illinois' Horticultural Research Center in St. Charles, uses a 100-acre tract at Route 38 and Peck Road to develop and test new varieties of grapes.

"Any fool can grow a grape. Once a grape plant is established, the hard part is killing it," Shoemaker said. "But nobody knows what to do

with it. There is an important relationship between fruit and light. They need filtered light, so it's important to manage the canopy of the plant very meticulously, removing plant material that is excessive to let in better light and allow air movement."

Illinois now has 60 to 70 varieties of wine grapes in production in Illinois, with about a dozen mainstays. But that took years of genetic research.

"What made the wine industry take off was breeding varieties with very good cold hardiness. We got to 27 below zero in January. You take any of the European grapes and put them in that kind of environment and they are toast," Shoemaker said. "We've interbred wild grapes with the quality of European grapes."

Shoemaker said he recently learned that \$20,000 pledged by the state to fund his work is

being held up in Springfield. And that means further delays in a research process which already typically takes five to six years. It is part of \$225,000, appropriated for the Illinois Grape Growers & Vintners Association, which is being held up by the governor.

"Back in the '20s, Illinois was the fourth largest producer of grapes in the country," Shoemaker said. "Prohibition was the first knockout blow, then the emergence of the West Coast as a wine producer."

Shoemaker said the expanded use of herbicides in grain fields and on turf has further hurt this fledgling industry, weakening grape plants and sapping their productivity.

Jeff Pankow, co-owner of Blue Star Vineyard in Hebron, said adjacent farmers are trying to reduce the amount of chemicals they use and time sprayings when drifting can be minimized. He hopes to eventually plant 10 acres of grapes.

Prairie State Winery, run by retired school teachers Rick and Maria Mamoser of Kingston, began growing grapes 11 years ago in Genoa. At the time there were just 16 wineries in the state, Maria Mamoser said.

Now their grapes, supplemented by others grown exclusively in southern Illinois, produce 10,000 gallons of wine a year. Twenty-four different wines, made exclusively from Illinois-grown grapes, are sold at their downtown Genoa store and by major retailers such

as Binny's Beverage Depot, Whole Foods, Sam's Wine & Spirits and Angelo Caputo's Fresh Markets.

"We're producing wines that could stand up to the most sophisticated palate," Rick Mamoser said. "We're at the cusp of being a very important industry. We're really having quite an impact on the economy. ... The wine that is sold from Illinois-produced

wineries is generating tax that is not being generated from wine that is being brought in. We're generating money for agriculture and generating money for workers."

Bonnie Heimbach, director of the Northern Illinois Tourism Development office, said 27 wineries already are part a state wine trail ([www.visitnorthernillinois.com/winetrail-wineries](http://www.visitnorthernillinois.com/winetrail-wineries)) and she anticipates that number growing.

"I expect wine tours to take off in the next 10 years," she said.

"While I think we have a ways to go to create the highest quality wines that we possibly can, new varieties coming along have improved the industry. ... I think we're making great progress."



Lauren M. Anderson - landerson@nwnewsgroup.com

Trent Schellhaass drills holes for grape vines at Blue Star Vineyards in Hebron.

See SQUEEZE, page 14

## Cover Story

**SQUEEZE, continued from page 13**

Those in the industry agree there is a lot of untapped potential. But Brenda Logan – owner of one of the state’s oldest vineyards, Baxter’s Vineyards in downstate Nauvoo – said production caps and out-of-state shipping restrictions have further hurt Illinois wine producers.

“It should be a little more free trade,” said Logan, treasurer of the Illinois Grape Growers & Vintners Association. “Everybody is increasing taxes and adding more paperwork. It’s making it a lot more difficult to do business.”

Add to that local liquor license, federal licenses and fees for label applications, which must be approved by the federal government, and Logan said it can be cheaper for large distributors and wholesalers who buy in mass quantities to import wine into Illinois than buy home-grown varieties.

Haje Black, owner of Salute! Farm & Vineyard off Pleasant Valley Road in Woodstock, believes that making wine a focal point of McHenry County’s economy, will require additional backing and flexibility in the areas of farmland protection, health department regulations, zoning and marketing.

“The reason it is not taking off is there is really no focus on it by McHenry County whatsoever,” she said. “There has to be a concerted effort on the part of the county board and its agriculture tourism committee to shake loose from some of the historical McHenry County issues having to do with how the health department operates. ... In other counties you can have dinner on a farm with wine. In McHenry County the only special-use permit for alcohol is a not-for-profit license, unless I want to buy a second liquor license. I already have a liquor license for Woodstock.”

Black hopes to make Salute!, which also grows an array of organic vegetables and herbs, into a “destination farm.”

But for the time being, she is focused on expanding her reach, distributing wine at retail and wholesale level.

However, simply putting on the public debut of her vineyard’s second vintage in May in downtown Woodstock was an extremely expensive and time-consuming endeavor to coordinate and promote. And that doesn’t include all of the production, bottling and distribution costs.

“Without land costs, figure on spending \$15,000 to \$20,000 an acre [of production],” she said. “It doesn’t just happen. McHenry County and the Economic Development Corp. have to proactively want to support and work to make a wine industry happen in the county.”