

Wine Down with friends

At Six Local Wineries Located in the Stateline Area

By Danielle Letenyei

Every year on Good Friday, Debbie and five women in her family drive north from their homes in northern Illinois to go wine tasting in southern Wisconsin. This year, they are starting at D.C. Estate Winery, which is right over the Wisconsin border in South Beloit, Illinois.

D.C. Estate Winery

Edison and Heidi Wirth opened D.C. Estate Winery three years ago and live next door. Ashley Bingham, the Wirths' daughter and operations manager, said her parents started the winery because they wanted a family business and they love wine.

"They are winos," Bingham said jokingly. Many of the wines at D.C. Estate are made using grapes that come from the Benton Harbor, Michigan, area. "They can grow more varieties there because of the warmer air coming off Lake Michigan," Bingham said. The family also grows its own grapes on the 20-

acre estate. Those grapes, which include Frontenac and Marquette varietals, should be ready for production in about two years, Bingham said.

For just \$5, you can try five of D.C. Estates' 15-plus wines. Most popular are the Peach Honey and Cranberry, both of which are sweet, fruity wines, Bingham said. Her favorite is the Meritage, which is a dry red blend of cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon and merlot. Debbie's favorite is the Cranberry. Between her and friends, the women bought 18 bottles, which range in price from \$12 to \$25.

Staller Estate Winery

The ladies' next stop was Staller Estate Winery in Delavan. Wendy and Joe Staller started making wine about 17 years ago when they were both students at UW-Whitewater. They started producing wine in their basement, Wendy said. After a while, they sent their wines out to competitions across the globe. Today, the Stallers have 70 international awards for their wine. "It was a hobby that got out of control," Wendy said.

In 2006, the couple bought their farm on County A near Highway 89 in Delavan with the intention of opening a winery and vineyard.

They have two acres of vineyard, where they grow winter-hardy varietals such as Marechal Foch, frontenac, La Crescent and Marquette grapes. They also use grapes from growers in other parts of Wisconsin and northern Illinois. All the wine is made and bottled on site in Delavan.

The two most popular wines at Staller are the Horizon Cuvee,

a semi-dry white wine with grapefruit citrus aromas, and the Richmond Rogue, a semi-sweet wine made from fresh Concord grapes. "It tastes like you picked the grape right off the vine and ate it," Wendy said.

Apple Barn Orchard & Winery

Off the beaten path in Elkhorn is the Apple Barn Orchard and Winery. Unlike other wineries that make their wines using different varieties of grapes, Judy and Steve Jacobson make all their wines from other fruits, such as blueberries, strawberries, apples, pears and more.

All the fruit for their apple and pear wines is grown in their 60-acre orchard. Seasonal fruit is used for the other wines. "With grape wines, sometimes they have to add enhancements," Judy said. "But with our fruit wines, we capture the natural flavors that the fruit gives us." The Jacobsons' farm has been in the family since 1846, and the orchard was planted in the late 1970s. Steve started making wine in the 1990s. Last year, nine of their wines placed at the Wisconsin State Fair. Their Strawberry Jewel wine was named Best Overall Fruit Wine at the Mid-America Wine Competition.

Top-selling wines vary by season, Judy said. Strawberry Jewel and Country Rhubarb are summer favorites. "In the fall, the Honey Crisp Apple Harvest and Hardy Pear are very popular," she said.

Timber Hill Winery

Amanda Stefl of Timber Hill Winery in Milton might be the area's youngest winemaker. Stefl, 28, started making wine right out of college. A Janesville-area native, Stefl received a degree in microbiology from the University of Iowa. After college, she worked in a lab making DNA for research. "It sounds cool, but it wasn't," she said. She heard about a winemaking and vineyard program offered by Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. In 2011, she started taking classes and making wine at home.

After getting married, she moved back to Wisconsin to pursue her dream of opening



her own winery. “I didn’t want to find another lab job,” Stefl said. She opened Timber Hill Winery in October 2016. Timber Hill wines are made primarily with cold-climate varietals that Stefl gets from the nearby communities of Oregon and West Bend, as well as New York state.

Stefl said her most popular wines are four in her “Social Sweet Series.” Named after hashtags, the series includes #TuesdayBoozeDayBlush, #WineWednesdayWhite, #ThrowbackThursdayRed and the newest, #MargaritaMonday, which is labeled as a “margarita wine cocktail” although it has no hard liquor in it. One of Timber Hill’s most unusual wines is a jalapeño wine, which is made from fermented jalapeños. Tastes of this spicy wine often are served with a side of Bloody Mary mix from Bushel & Peck’s Local Market in Beloit.

NorthLeaf Winery

Gail Nordlof, owner of NorthLeaf Winery in Milton, began making wine in the 1990s—around the same time her husband, John, started making beer. “I thought, ‘He’s making beer; I might as well make wine,’” Gail said. “My stuff got bigger and bigger, and his got smaller and smaller. He said he’d have to build me a winery to get me out of his brew room.”

The couple toyed with the idea of opening a brewpub. But when the former Sunnyview Apple Orchard Warehouse in Milton came on the market, they knew the historical landmark was better suited for a winery. They bought and renovated the building and opened NorthLeaf Winery in February 2009. The couple’s last name, Nordlof, inspired the winery’s name because it means “north leaf” in Swedish. They started by making three large and three small batches of wine. The three small batches sold out by the end of the first weekend NorthLeaf was open, Gail said.

Today, the winery offers about 27 different varietals on the menu. Gail uses grapes from across the globe, including California, New York, Chile and Italy. What’s her favorite wine? “That would be like choosing your favorite child,” Gail said. “I like them all.” She said a fan favorite is her Clear Lake Road Red, which is made with Concord grapes from the Finger Lakes region of New York.

NorthLeaf Wine Club members get the advantage of being taste-testers for special batches that Gail creates to highlight different grapes, regions or cellar techniques. If one of those specialty batches gets an overwhelmingly positive response from wine club members, that wine is added as a stock wine.

Fermenting Cellars

Bill Eckert, owner of Fermenting Cellars, learned almost everything he knows about wine from his father. “I used to come home from my paper route, and my dad would have some wine fermenting,” Eckert said.

Eckert started making his own wine in 1984 and joined forces with his father’s winemaking efforts in 1991. “Before we were a winery, we had 18 varieties and 300 gallons between two hobby winemakers—Dad and I,” he said.

Eckert’s wife, Mary, is his official wine-taster. The couple took their winemaking to the next level in 2010 and opened Fermenting Cellars in their log home on West Manogue Road, north of Janesville. Of their nine wines, Bill’s favorite is Gone Too Soon, a blend of three red wines matured using the Solera process, an aging system developed by the Spanish and Portuguese that is used to produce sherry and port. Gone Too Soon has sentimental value for Eckert because it is the last recipe his father developed before he died in 2009. His father originally called it Potawatomi Power after the family’s Native American heritage. “(My Dad) used to say, ‘Bring more over before it’s gone too soon,’” Bill said. So he changed the wine name in his father’s honor after his death.

At a Fermenting Cellars tasting, all the wines are served at room temperature. “I want people to taste the body of the wine and the grape,” Eckert said. Eckert uses grapes from Brodhead for his red wines and also brings in juice from Michigan-area vineyards. The wine is stored in the house’s cellar, and everything is bottled, corked and labeled on site.

Unique to the menu at Fermenting Cellars is a specialty wine, Quoffee, which is made from fermented coffee. Eckert gets coffee for the wine from Mocha Moment in Janesville. “I’m their only customer that orders 200 gallons,” he said.

Love the idea of going wine tasting with your girlfriends?

At least six wineries are located within a short drive of the stateline area. Most of their hours change seasonally, so check their websites to verify.

D.C. Estate Winery

8877 E. State Line Rd., South Beloit, IL

Open Hours:

11 a.m.-7 p.m. Wednesday,
Thursday and Friday;
11 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday;
Noon-5 p.m. Sunday.
Tasting cost: \$5 for five.
Bottle prices: \$12-\$25.

Staller Estate Winery

W8896 County A, Delavan, WI

Open Hours:

Daily from 11 a.m.-6 p.m.
through August.
Tasting cost: \$5 for four
Bottle prices: \$10.50-\$19.95.

Apple Barn Orchard & Winery

W6384 Sugar Creek Road, Elkhorn, WI.

Open Hours:

10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.
Tasting cost: Free.
Bottle prices: \$9.95-\$15.95.

Timber Hill Winery

1223 E. Storrs Lake Rd No. 1, Milton, WI.

Open Hours:

11 a.m.-7 p.m. Friday and Saturday,
11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday.
Tasting cost: \$5 for five.
Bottle prices: \$9.99-\$21.99.

NorthLeaf Winery

232 S. Janesville St., Milton, WI.

Open Hours:

11 a.m.-7 p.m. Wednesday, Thursday
and Saturday;
11 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday,
11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday.
Tasting cost: Six wines for \$4.75 or a
seated tasting is four wines for \$5.
Bottle prices: \$12-\$16.

Fermenting Cellars

2004 W. Manogue Road, Janesville, WI.

Open Hours:

1 p.m.-9 p.m. Friday through Sunday.
Check schedule for private events.
Tasting cost: Free.
Bottle prices: \$12-\$15.