

November 19, 2006

## Iowa Finds Itself Deep in Heart of Wine Country

By [SUSAN SAULNY](#)

ADEL, Iowa — Stan Olson used to grow corn and soybeans on hundreds of acres here on the Raccoon River west of Des Moines, but no more. These days, Mr. Olson's empty grain silo is useful only as a rustic image to promote his new vineyard and tasting room.

Mr. Olson's Penoch Winery is a tiny operation in a red barn behind his family's farmhouse, next to a small grape nursery. It does not have much of a customer base yet or any vintages that go beyond last year, but Mr. Olson is thrilled nonetheless.

"I will make as much selling grape plants off of two acres this year as I did many years on 1,000 acres of corn and raising 3,000 head of hogs," said Mr. Olson, who makes much of his money selling cuttings to other aspiring vintners.

"This year was a very good year," he said.

When wineries began popping up around the region in the 1970s — the first rebound of a local industry killed by Prohibition — many people thought it was a fad that would go the way of herbal diets and frozen yogurt stands.

But across the Midwest, wineries are thriving, both as tourism magnets and profit-making businesses. Some are even producing quality wine, sommeliers say, made possible by French-American grape hybrids that are bred to thrive in cold climates.

They have been so successful that more corn, soybean and tobacco farmers are clearing fields and planting grapes. In Iowa alone, a new winery has been licensed every two weeks for the past year, officials say. Now, more than 700 acres are devoted to grapes (compared with 15 in 2000) and there are close to 70 commercial wineries. Iowa has also just hired its first state oenologist to help guide the novice winemakers.

Other Plains and Midwestern states are also producing grapes, and uncorking more of the bottles they produce.

In South Dakota, for instance, the number of wineries has more than doubled recently, to 11. In Indiana, the local wine industry has added \$34 million to the economy annually. And Ohio is spending \$900,000 to promote its local vintages, competing with more established regions in California, the Goliath of American wine.

"We're not afraid to take them on," said Fred L. Dailey, director of the Ohio Department of Agriculture. Bragging about a recent West Coast competition where an Ohio Riesling won an award, Mr. Dailey said dismissively, "We beat out all those over-oaked chardonnays over there."

Much of the soil in the Midwest is too rich for good grape production, but grapes can grow and even thrive, experts say, in sunny areas with sandy, well-drained soil. Because of the extreme temperatures around much of the region, traditional European grape varieties tend not to do well, but some newer hybrid grape types can withstand the cold.

In a region where farmers have suffered through hard times for decades, the prospect of Bacchus smiling down upon the fields has produced a kind of farm-based optimism rarely seen in these parts.

“I go to sleep and wake up with a smile on my face,” said David Klodd, a native Iowan and an assistant winemaker at the Summerset Winery in Indianola, where sales have been increasing by about 20 percent a year. Summerset expects to sell a total of 130,000 bottles of a dozen varieties this year at \$10 a bottle. Mr. Klodd is passionate about grapes, and his biggest problem is running out of Summerset’s best seller, a semisweet red, now that the wine is under contract to be sold in stores.

“People used to think it was funny, the idea of grapes and wine in Iowa,” he said. “They laughed at me when I’d go into the farm service to buy chemicals. Well, they don’t laugh anymore.”

Summerset has also become a tourist destination, with concerts on the weekends, themed parties and grape-stomps that draw thousands. Tourists will actually pay for the privilege to stomp grapes, Mr. Klodd was surprised to learn.

“I put a couple thousand pounds into a tank and people go nuts,” he said. “This is a tourist industry. If we were here just as a winery, I wouldn’t have a job. You have to develop a base, and we do that with harvest parties and weddings.”

The lifestyle is still new to many in the Corn Belt. “Even on a bad day you can be happy — just drink some of your own stuff,” said Mr. Olson, whose thick workman’s hands now gently pour Penoach’s delicate blends.

Agricultural economists say the timing is right for wineries like Summerset and Penoach — the original Indian name for Adel — because the American public is becoming more wine-friendly and is increasingly fond of all things local. Nationally, wine sales grew by 5 percent last year, to a retail value of \$26 billion, according to the Wine Institute, an advocacy group for the industry.

“In the Midwest, it goes back to wanting to make homemade wine and having it represent the character of the region,” said Bruce P. Bordelon, an associate professor of horticulture and landscape architecture at [Purdue University](#). “The wineries aren’t trying to be Napa, they’re trying to be Illinois. And there’s a place for all of them.”

Indeed, most Midwestern wine is consumed locally. But even at home, the wine can sometimes be a hard sell because the newly developed cold-hardy grapes are often unfamiliar to consumers. They go by names like vidal blanc, seyval blanc and chambourcin.

“You just say, ‘You like merlot? Well, here’s something similar, and we grow it out back. See if you like it,’ ” Dr. Bordelon said. “Most of the time, guess what? They do.”

Outside the Midwest, the wines face even more of an uphill battle.

“I’m not really feeling it here,” said Izabela Wojcik, programming director at the James Beard Foundation, a New York group that promotes regional cuisine. “I’m not seeing anything from the Midwest at this point.”

Ms. Wojcik recently held a dinner that featured wine from Idaho, and though it turned out to be excellent, she said, “We felt a little bit like it was a gamble.”

Still, food and wine experts agree that things are changing.

“The Europeans have had centuries to understand their vines,” said Doug Frost, a master sommelier based in Kansas City, Mo. “Lately, Midwesterners have produced some lovely wines from these vines, aided by

greater experience in the vineyards and in the wineries.”

Perhaps most important in Iowa is the fact that wine — whatever it tastes like — is giving farmers the possibility of a decent living again. Some young people are choosing the vineyard back home over jobs in cities and suburbs.

Corey Goodhue is one such young farmer. His family cultivates 3,300 acres of corn and soybeans near Des Moines. Upon graduation from [Iowa State University](#) in December, Mr. Goodhue, 23, will have many options but says he will go back to the farm. He has big ideas about grapes.

“We’re not getting enough value out of corn and beans,” he said. “But these grapes, there’s a tremendous market emerging. On one acre of ground, if we net \$40 with corn or beans we’ve done good. With grapes, you could net upwards of \$1,500 an acre. For us, growing grapes, it’s the holy grail of high-value crops.”

And that is without a winery or tourism. Mr. Goodhue said he was interested only in growing, not winemaking. He investigated apples, raspberries and rhubarb as potential moneymakers, to no avail. But grape-tending even fit nicely into the slow months of the corn- and bean-growing season.

“My dad said that if he was my age he would do it because it makes sense,” Mr. Goodhue said. “But most importantly, I’ve had a lot of fun doing it. I like to put on my iPod and work on the grapes.”

In April, Mr. Goodhue planted his first acre of vines with the help of some buddies from Iowa State. Start-up costs were \$6,000, and he said he planned to plant six additional acres next year.

“When we were putting up the trellises, people were rubber-necking and stopping on the road to ask, ‘What are you guys doing?’ ” he said. “They had no idea, but they were certainly interested.”

[Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---