



## Discovering Fine Wines in Southwest Pennsylvania

If Pennsylvania wine is anything it is diverse; in its terroir, wines and people, we are all over the map, literally and figuratively. We are still introducing Denise Gardner, Penn State's new extension enologist, to the vastness of the industry she serves, and in early October we spent a couple of days southeast of Pittsburgh in the lovely Laurel Highlands with the help of our extension colleagues Lee Young in Washington County and Miguel Saviroff in Somerset. We got lucky with two perfect days of weather which, at least for the grapes, was welcome but perhaps too little, too late for the wine.

There are two great rewards in my extension work: seeing a new generation of wine growers join their parents and-or grandparents to make wine and preserve a family farm. The other is to taste fine wines that appear in unexpected places. We experienced both during this visit. They are indicators of a maturing wine industry.

The challenges in the vineyard are enormous and extend into the winery. The vineyards look battle-worn from diseases and winter injury over time, it's not an easy life for a vine at high elevation in a continental climate, nor has this growing season been an easy one for the vines. Depending on elevation, the growing season is short, about 150 days on the outside, and the winters, while not as harsh as the northern tier, test the resilience of all but the hardiest vines. In these conditions, site and variety selection are critical to quality and survival. The investment on deer fencing alone is enough to scare most people away from a vineyard. Ray Matthews told us about an incident with a bear in the vineyard while his crew was working. The wineries here are spread out and isolate from any support infrastructure that others wine regions take for granted. They have to work twice as hard (and maybe spend twice as much) to get the same thing done. Despite the difficulties, very nice fruit, mostly reds, were hanging on the vine enjoying a bit of Indian summer after two weeks of rain. Because of ripeness and other issues, wine makers are constantly challenged with fruit that, well, isn't quite what it could be. High acid, low phenolic grapes are typical of cool/cold regions. In the vineyard and cellar, the grower and winemaker have to be nimble, creative, smart and willing to take a risk. It's just what they do here all the time. And, you know what? The wines are really good.





Sharon and John Klay, along with their amazing vineyard manager Ray Matthews have been growing hybrid and vinifera wine grapes above 2000' in Fayette County for 20 years. Nothing comes easy at that elevation. They are smart, veteran, hard working wine growers. Sharon has always been a leader in the industry, and currently serves on the Pennsylvania Winery Association board. She is unfailingly supportive of the cooperative extension service. Their son and the winery's namesake is beginning to help at the winery more and, well, maybe someday he'll be inspired to take it over.

Not many miles from the Flight 93 memorial is Glade's Pike Winery where Steve and Karen Adleman and his wine maker Josh Hetrick have been crafting excellent hybrid and vinifera wines. We tasted a wonderful Norton that had nice balance with very low acid and grapey character for the variety. Their aromatic whites were extremely attractive.

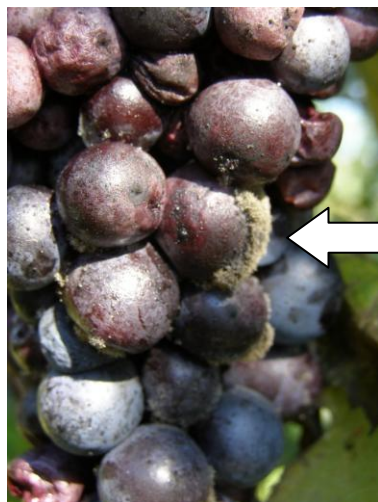
I had heard rumors of very good wines coming out of Briar Valley Vineyards, a new winery started by Tod and Jean Manspecker in Bedford County. They won a gold medal at the San Francisco Chronicle wine competition and Craig LaBan, the food and wine writer for the Philadelphia Inquirer, who was a judge, contacted me about them and all I could do was shrug my shoulders. Foolish me. The Manspeckers could be poster kids for how to develop a successful small winery business very far from the beaten path. We tasted their wines and they are drop dead delicious, especially the Riesling and Gewurztraminer. Of course, this is white wine country so that might be expected, but what really surprised me was the quality of their red wines, including Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and a Meritage blend. Each one was varietally precise, with great flavors, balance and depth. Notably absent was any harsh acidity or unpleasant green flavors. These are very impressive wines. They have an amazing tasting room with a copper ceiling that takes your breath away. Jean and Tod are as humble as they are nice and they speak the truth about their lack of experience and wish to make fine wines. To make their dream come true, they hired Michael Shaps, the very respected wine maker from Virginia and, more recently, Jeanette Smith, also from Virginia to help with the vineyard. This is my yardstick for a serious winery – gathering a team that can work together to grow and make excellent wines. Jeanette took us to the new vineyard site about 10 miles east of the winery and it is very impressive, stony, steep east slope planted with *vinifera* varieties on north-south rows. An all *vinifera* vineyard in this area gives me a bit of pause but they are determined to make it work and the early results are extremely promising.



If the Klays are among the pioneers of the region, the Manspeckers represent a new generation of wine growers who have the opportunity to use all of the experience gained over the years and blend it with new ideas and technologies in the vineyard and winery that should yield excellent

wines. But with a short season and cold winters, it will always be viticulture on the edge in the southwestern hills. They are willing to take the risk and reap the rewards.

While I was in the area I looked at another potential vineyard site which appeared to have a lot of potential. It's easy to see in the Pittsburgh area a healthy and vibrant wine industry. With new viticulture technology and practices, in particular grape varieties with a shorter growing season and the necessary cold hardiness, a high quality and sustainable wine region for the consumers to enjoy.



If you ever doubted how opportunistic grape disease are just look at this photo of a Cabernet Franc berry (left) that split due to excessive rain and how the botrytis has colonized right along the edges of the wound.

On the other hand, this Vidal Blanc (at right) was infected earlier with botrytis but weather conditions were conducive to the development of noble rot (as opposed to gray mold), which concentrates the sugar and flavors of the berry and makes some of the great sweet wines of the world. Same disease, two completely different outcomes. Go figure. I can't think of a better metaphor for the fine line between great wine and toil and trouble in our business.



I would like to thank Miguel Savioff, Lee Young, Sharon Klay, Steve Adleman, Jean Manspeaker and all the people who participated in the vineyard and winery tour. I look forward to returning to the region soon. If you are interested in starting a commercial vineyard and-or winery in the region, please contact Denise or me, or Lee Young in the Washington County Cooperative Extension office.

Mark L. Chien  
Viticulture Educator  
Penn State Cooperative Extension  
<http://pawinegrape.com/>