



## Vineyards in Erie County



Every vineyard is a unique place to grow grapes. On a beautiful afternoon in Erie County, with the sun shining and the lake in view, I visited two vineyards with Andy Muza, the horticulture extension agent in Erie, and each left a distinct impression on me, which I'll share with you.

The first vineyard we visited represents what I wish for when a juice grape grower transitions to wine grapes. In many ways juice and wine grapevines and culture are the same but they are dissimilar enough to cause some discomfort when adjusting farming practices and principles from one to the other. Mainly, wine grapes are

more finicky and fussy and take more care, and crop level has a greater affect on fruit quality. He claimed not be much of a reader, or student of viticulture, preferring to learn by doing, and talking to others about what to do. We saw that he is a quick study when it comes to selecting varieties, designing and developing his new vineyard. Perhaps most importantly he chose among his 200 acres of existing vineyard the very best locations for to grow his *vinifera* vines, understanding the demands that these temperamental grapes that in rainy years have to be sprayed up to 20 times, place upon the site and grower. Because cold and frost are regular threats in Erie, the Riesling and Pinot Gris are on slopes that drain out and resist pooling air and water. The grower told me his only big surprise was the clay soil on his PG site, which after having lived all his life on the farm, he always believed to be sandy. Nevertheless, his choice of 101-14 rootstock and drip irrigation was appropriate and will promote the quality of his fruit. He had crunched the numbers and when he realized that the pay- back period on wine grapes would be half of what he could achieve with juice grapes, he forged ahead with the change. When I did the rough math in my head I figured the gross return on an acre of wine grapes to be about double for juice at estimated prices for Riesling and Concord in the area. I do not know exactly how he gathered all of the information necessary to design, prepare, and install such a nice vineyard, but all the standards that measure quality were met to my eye – 7.5 x 5, VSP, 2 sets of catch wires, straight vines and rows, etc. He was clever to develop a partnership with Arrowhead Winery, and used Nick's considerable knowledge and experience to help him to get established. Mostly, I am impressed by the knowledge he has gained, as we talked about the 2012 Riesling yields, which he misjudged and knew to be over-cropped, yet good farming practices helped the push the fruit to adequate maturity. But he understands the correlation between yield and quality, and the need for his grapes to meet the expectations of the winery. I encourage growers to get every single last berry from their vines that will meet the quality standard of the winery and sustain a healthy grapevine. It is not an easy, but neither too complicated, jump from native grapes to *vinifera*, and a lot of it depends on the goals of the winery and the type, style and price point of the wines that the grapes will be used to make.

At another vineyard visit a couple of days later it was raining really hard and we got soaked standing and talking about the vineyard, which was very impressive. Two young growers who are really getting after wine quality in a big way and a hurry. I was extremely impressed by their questions that included rootstocks, clones, training methods and trellis systems, soils, vineyard floor management, it covered the range of factors that contribute to wine quality. They were trying to balance the need to produce grapes to pay for the vineyard but keep a close eye on quality so they could establish their reputation as fine wine growers.

Another winery specializes in fruit wines and they were very good quality. The attention to detail in the wine making was impressive, and the grower had brought in consultants to help him. I can't say how important this is for beginners both in the vineyard and cellar. The more mistakes you can avoid, the sooner you'll reach the quality level necessary for the business to be profitable.

Vineyards in other sites are more challenging, with the typical rises and dips that characterize the lake bench, and especially near the roads and railroad tracks that act as barriers to air and water movement. Vineyard quality exists over a wide range but it should be according to the expectations for the wine being produced. Mostly hybrids were planted and trained to a high wire cordon, and we were told by the grower that they are very productive vines. My feeling was that this particular vineyard did not have the same potential of either of the first two, both as a site and the kind of care it was receiving – the grower was spending less money to grow the grapes, but the bottom-line is that if the winery is satisfied with the grapes, all is well. I couldn't help but notice that some vineyards are already the object of some low-key competition among the area's winemakers to secure the grapes. Wine makers have a sixth sense about who is growing the best fruit, and as the wine industry expands in Erie, both in size and reputation, there will be increasing demand for fruit from the best vineyards. Even vineyards in close proximity there can be a world of difference, but the possibility that a vineyard adequately serves the needs of the winery that uses their grapes. Each is a direct reflection of its terroir, owner and management style.

From my visit to Erie I could make the following suggestions to grape growers:

- Site selection is critical to successful cultivation of *vinifera* wine grapes, which are extremely sensitive to spring frost and winter injury. Well-drained, concave land forms are highly preferred
- Analyzing the soil by digging soil pits can be extremely helpful in the design of the vineyard and assignment of the most appropriate rootstock. Gravel is preferred for wine grapes, especially reds, over sand and clay. Vines should be spaced to achieve proper size (and hence balance).
- Choosing the best species-variety according to site, viticulture and market considerations will make everything downstream much easier
- Artificial drainage and active frost protection measures can help to mitigate site imperfections but can be expensive to install
- Growers should balance prune a few vines in each block to get a sense of vine balance in the range of 0.4-5 lb/foot of trellis
- Vines should be managed to achieve proper balance
- A nutrition management program should be based on regular petiole tests and regular, but less frequent soil tests. Dr. Terry Bates is a great resource!
- Yields for *vinifera* should be in the 5-10 lb fruit per lb of pruning weight
- Irrigation scheduling is still much more of an art than science in the East. We need to gather much more data and experience to properly manage soil-plant water relations.
- The best growers seem to spray *vinifera* varieties on a 7-10 day interval, stretching a few days during dry periods. Special attention must be paid to tight cluster varieties susceptible to fruit rots Bryan Hed is a great resource.

In discussions with a few growers we heard some consternation about the annual variability of grape orders from the wineries, both amount and varieties. Since growing grapes is a long term endeavor involving a perennial crop, it sure helps for the farmer to know from one year to the next how much and what amount of each grape he or she will need to grow. Winery grape needs are, of course, based on sales, and while there are “hot” varieties in the wine sales market at any given time, most wineries have pretty consistent sales from year to year, and usually they project sales at least into the next year. Growers and wine makers should work closely to match the needs of the winery with the composition of the vineyard. I believe in and encourage the use of grape contracts. I know there are many who fear or dislike contracts, and consider them a sign of mistrust or lack of integrity. I view them as exactly the opposite – that they are a strong indicator of a maturing grape industry that is more professional and willing to do business like every other industry. The 3-page [grape contract](#) that I used as a grower at Temperance Hill was less a legal document than a reminder to wine maker and me of a conversation that we had six months earlier when we decided how much of certain varieties at a specific price would be supplied by the vineyard to the winery, and a list of the viticulture practices that would be employed to grow the fruit (which the wine maker already knew anyway). In the chaos of harvest, when snap decisions are being made, it’s really helpful to have a simple reminder of what was agreed upon oh-so many months ago. It’s smart, it’s easy and it’s professional. I encourage growers to strive for long-term contracts with their best winery customers.

Denise Gardner provided wine comments and information to wine makers and Dr. Kathy Kelley offered a primer in wine business and marketing as part of the afternoon coffee pot meeting.

It’s very exciting to see and taste the progress in the Erie region. Coffee pots at 21 Brix and Courtyard Wineries drew big crowds and we had great discussions. Thank you to Kris Kane and Randy Graham for being our hosts. 6 Mile Winery in Harborcreek is an exciting new small winery and the Mazzas have an amazing new distillery/microbrewery about ready to open on the NY side. The region has a new promotional program for the wine industry and it is forging ahead.

I would like to thank Andy Muza for organizing this tour, and Bryan Hed, Kevin Martin, and Jodi Timer from Penn State, and Tim Weigle and James Taylor from Cornell for their hospitality during our visit.

#### Reference Resources:

- Lake Erie Wine Country - <http://www.lakeeriewinecountry.org/>
- Lake Erie Regional Grape Program - <http://lergp.cce.cornell.edu/>
- Penn State Lake Erie Regional Grape Research and Extension Center - <http://agsci.psu.edu/research/centers/erie>

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## LOCAL WINE LIST

### Dry

	Glass	1/2 carafe
Lakeview Wine Cellars Vintners Reserve Chardonnay (white).....	5.50	15.00
<i>Fermented and aged 12 months in oak with hints of butterscotch and vanilla.</i>		
Mazza Vineyards Pinot Grigio (white).....	4.50	12.00
<i>Dry and crisp with a hint on melon.</i>		
Courtyard Wineries La Courette Chardonnay (white).....	6.00	16.00
<i>Fresh and crisp with a hint of apricot-infused tangerine and a smooth finish.</i>		
Mazza Vineyards Merlot (red).....	4.50	12.00
<i>Smooth and dry notes of plum and black cherry.</i>		
Presque Isle Wine Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon (red).....	5.25	14.50
<i>Aged in American oak barrels for 14 months with black olive aroma and undertones of cedar and earthiness.</i>		
Penn Shore Vineyards Noiret (red).....	4.25	11.50
<i>Aged nine months in American and Hungarian oak barrels. Smooth red with light oak, black pepper and cherry overtones.</i>		
Heritage Wine Cellars Burgundy (red).....	4.00	11.10
<i>Dry, hybrid blend in a Bordeaux style.</i>		

### Semi-Dry

Arrowhead Wine Cellars Riesling (white).....	4.50	12.00
<i>Crisp and fruity with flavors reminiscent of apricots, nectarines and honey.</i>		
Presque Isle Wine Cellars Reflections of Lake Erie (white).....	4.25	11.50
<i>A blend of cayuga white, riesling and vidal grapes expressing the potential for white wine in the Lake Erie region.</i>		
Arrowhead Wine Cellars Ambrosia (red).....	4.75	13.00
<i>Hints of dark fruit and berries with a smooth finish.</i>		

### Semi-Sweet / Sweet

Mazza Vineyards Country Blush (blush).....	4.00	11.00
<i>Delicate semi-sweet with hints of strawberries.</i>		
Burch Farms Steuben (blush).....	4.00	11.00
<i>Intense clean grape character, refreshing steuben grapes make a fruity, smooth taste.</i>		
Lakeview Wine Cellars Niagara (white).....	4.00	11.00
<i>Local niagara grapes produce a pleasantly sweet and fruity wine.</i>		
Penn Shore Vineyards Crystal Lake (white).....	4.00	11.00
<i>A pleasantly sweet wine with a hint of fruitiness.</i>		
Courtyard Wineries Barjo Bons Dazzle (white).....	4.50	12.00
<i>Sweet and fruity white wine made with cayuga and a touch of niagara.</i>		
Heritage Wine Cellars Winter Pear (white).....	4.00	11.00
<i>Crisp white with natural pear</i>		
Lakeview Wine Cellars Red Sky (red).....	4.25	11.50
<i>A blend of concord and niagara grapes. Smooth and easy to drink.</i>		
Burch Farms Concord (red).....	4.00	11.00
<i>Sweet, intense grape flavor. Like eating concord grapes off the vine.</i>		
Heritage Wine Cellars Flagship Port (red).....	4.25	11.50
<i>Old school concord port</i>		
South Shore Wine Company Rosé (rosé).....	4.00	11.00
<i>Bright and fruity; White Zin on steroids.</i>		

### Wines not from our Region

Almaden Chardonnay.....	4.00	11.00
Almaden Chablis.....	4.00	11.00
Almaden White Zinfandel.....	4.00	11.00
Gallo Chardonnay.....	5.00	14.00
Folonari Pinot Grigio.....	5.00	14.00
Riunite Bianco.....	4.00	11.00
Riunite Lambrusco.....	4.00	11.00

P.S. I could not help but delight in this wine list at the Freeport Restaurant in North East, PA that featured mostly local wines and "Wines not from our Region." Way to go Freeport!!