



## Rhubarb and Dandelion Wines from the Amana Colonies

[http://www.iowaartscouncil.org/programs/folk-and-traditional-arts/place\\_based\\_foods/stories1.htm](http://www.iowaartscouncil.org/programs/folk-and-traditional-arts/place_based_foods/stories1.htm)

Rachelle H. Saltzman, Ph.D.

Folklife Coordinator, Iowa Arts Council

© Copyright Iowa Arts Council. All Rights Reserved

<http://www.iowawineandbeer.com/amanatrail.html>

### **Ackerman Family**

#### **Ackerman Winery**

4406 220th Trail

Amana, IA 52203

319/622-3279, 319/622-3379

Fax: 319/622-6513

<http://www.ackermanwinery.com>

### **The Heritage Wine and Cheese Haus**

4402 220th Trail

Amana, IA 52203

319/622-3564

<http://www.ackermanwinery.com>

### **Old Wine Cellar Winery**

4411 220th Trail

Amana, IA 52203

319/622-3116

<http://www.ackermanwinery.com>

### **Krauss Family**

#### **Ehrle Brothers Winery**

4105 V Street Homestead, Iowa 52236

319/622.3241 [vwinery@netins.net](mailto:vwinery@netins.net)

<http://www.iowawineandbeer.com/docs/ehrlbrothers.html>

### **Village Winery**

752 48th Ave.

Amana, IA 52203

800/731-7142 or 319/622-3448

<mailto:mwinery@southslope.net>

<http://www.thevillagewinery.com>

### **Village Vintner**

4313 220th Trail Amana, IA 52203 319.622.3181

<http://www.iowawineandbeer.com/docs/villagevintner.html>

The Community of True Inspiration, a German Lutheran sect founded in 1714 by Eberhard Ludwig Gruber and Johann Friedrich Rock, immigrated in 1842 to Buffalo, New York, and to Iowa in 1855. By 1863, the Inspirationists had built seven small villages, now known collectively as the Amana Colonies, located just southwest of Cedar Rapids. The original settlers lived in communal houses, worked in communal gardens and kitchens, ate in communal dining houses, and produced a variety of products from communal businesses. Each family worked in the vineyard and all contributed grapes for the annual harvest. Each adult received an allotment of wine each year. Besides producing wine from a variety of grapes (Clintons, Concord, Beta), the Amana Colonies produced rhubarb wine from locally grown plants. This continued until 1919, when Prohibition necessitated the destruction of over 19,000 gallons of wine.

In 1934, however, Congress repealed Prohibition and commercial wine production began with the opening of Ehrle Brothers. The separation of business and church affairs in 1932, which dissolved the Amana's communal system, laid the groundwork for the establishment of new, individually-owned businesses. In the

1970s, visitors to Iowa's number one tourist attraction encouraged the expansion and re-establishment of Amanas' wineries, whose genealogy is complex.

Rhubarb wine, known in Amana German as *piestengel* (pie plant for the English "pie" and the German "stengel" or stalk), is one of two original Amana wines (along with Concord grape wine). Ehrle Brothers (re-established 1934), the Village Winery, and the Village Vintner, all owned by the Krauss family, and Ackerman's winery (re-established 1954), The Heritage Wine and Cheese Haus, and the Old Wine Cellar Winery, all owned by the Ackerman family, produce dandelion wine and different varieties of rhubarb wines from local flowers and plants. While the dry wine is not as well-known as the sweet, it is both a part of the Amana (and thus Iowa's) story and heritage.

"Rhubarb and Dandelion wines are the exception [to wines made from outsourced juices]. With a long tradition of making these wines at home, the wineries of Amana have carved out a niche, no matter how unusual it may be. These wines were actually fun, and differed from winery to winery." – Stephen Reiss's "The Wine Road-Iowa" 5/18/05, <http://blog.wineeducation.com/2005/05/wine-road-iowa.html>

Today, the Krauss family produces sweet and dry rhubarb wine from 100% local rhubarb. Don's parents, Don and Eunice Krauss, started their business in 1973, a time when tourism was beginning to peak in the Amanas. Don Senior, born and raised in the Amanas, grew up in the house across the street from today's Village Winery. Don's grandfather, like many Amana men, made wine in his cave (cellar), a root cellar four to five steps down from the basement. Don's *opa* converted this space to make both grape and rhubarb wines. When Don and Eunice made the winery into a formal business in the 1970s, it was one of the first to add sweet fruit wines—cherry, strawberry, and plum—made from purchased juices.

In 1954, Les Ackerman's grandfather, Henry, a butcher by trade, had his basement winery bonded. Les's parents, Harry and Louise, opened the Ackerman Winery, which produced grape and rhubarb wine from local fruit. They also added cherry to the list. When Les and his wife, Linda, bought out the winery in 1974, they added several new varieties. At first, he and his wife wild-cropped elderberries, mulberries, strawberries, and other fruits. Demand for their sweet wine grew, however, and eventually, they decided to focus on wine making itself. Ackerman's purchases fruits, berries, and grapes from Oregon, Wisconsin, Michigan, California and elsewhere. According to Les, in 1954, the winery made 12 barrels of wine, six of rhubarb and six of concord grape; today, the winery produces 22 varieties of wine, including a premium merlot, for a total of 14,000 gallons.

A fourth-generation vintner, whose daughter Greta makes the 5<sup>th</sup>, Les was, as he puts in "raised in the wine cellar." His great, great-grandfather came over with the original group of True Inspirationists. From the time he was five, Les picked rhubarb for his grandfather's and then his father's wine making. Amana folklore has it that rhubarb wine became popular one year when there was a shortage of grapes; someone came up with the idea of fermenting rhubarb. Explains Les, "rhubarb loves to ferment, and make lots of alcohol, so it became very popular very quickly."

According to Don Krauss, as well as Les Ackerman, in earlier times, rhubarb, dandelion, and grape wines were the only truly local Amana wines. As a child, Don picked dandelions for the Sandstone and Old Wine Cellar wineries, since his grandfather made only grape and rhubarb wines—the former from the Concord grapes grown on local grape trellises that adorn just about every Amana house. But those grapes do not produce anywhere near amount needed today, and now all Amana grape wine is made from purchased juice.

Unlike the grape wine, dandelion made is made from locally grown flowers. Dandelion wine is always place-based, because of the nature of the plant, whose blossoms start to close as soon as they are picked. Wineries

have to be close to where the dandelions grow so that the just-picked flowers can be quickly run into the wineries; the flavor can get aggressive fast because of the plant's bitter leaves.

George Krauss of Middle Amana made a commercial dandelion wine in the mid-1960s, Ackerman recalls. "It became quite popular with customers, so some of other wineries, including ours, began to experiment because dandelion's always an experiment." Both Don and Les related that their customers were fascinated by dandelion wine, which they saw as something unique and also old-fashioned. As Les puts it, "dandelion wine tries to emulate a smell," the smell of childhood summers.

Every spring, around the last week in April and the first week in May, ads for dandelions appear in the local paper. Local scout troops and other groups use dandelion picking as a fundraiser. Winemakers pay \$4 per gallon of blossoms. "If the dandelions are nice and open, you can pick three to four gallons per hour, but it's very hard on your back. So people tend to pick for 2-3 hours then quit. . . . It usually takes a gallon of blossoms for a gallon of wine, . . . but the main ingredient is the yellow flower," explains Ackerman.

Once picked, the blossoms are immediately steeped in hot water and then pressed. The winemaker really has to monitor the aroma as well as taste. Sugar, water, and yeast are added to the extract left after pressing. This starts the fermenting process, which lasts around three weeks. After that, the wine is racked, filtered four times, stabilized, bottled, and left to age or mellow.

Making rhubarb wine is not quite as time sensitive as dandelion, but it can still be a delicate process. After the change in the early '30s, explains Don Krauss, every family in Amana made their own wine. Ackerman's, which produces considerably more wine than the Krauss family's business, last year bought about 40% of their rhubarb locally; they'd be more than willing to purchase more, but not enough is picked in Iowa for their needs. Rhubarb wine bottled under the Village Winery's label is all from local rhubarb. Don Krauss buys his juice from Harlan Geiger, a neighbor who both grows his own and buys the rest from local farmers. Geiger, whose father, Harry, started the businesses, both cuts and presses rhubarb stalks for several wineries. Harlan asks early in the year how much rhubarb juice the wineries will need; the more demand, the more manure he uses to fertilize and produce more plants, which he harvests around Memorial Day.

Geiger uses about 10 pounds of rhubarb stalks to make 1 gallons of juice; Ackerman uses a somewhat higher ratio of 13 to 1. After taking the removing the leaves from the stalks, Geiger, who uses a straight press, grinds them twice and then presses the rhubarb. The Ackermans use a roller grinder and then press the ground stalks along with rice hulls, which, used with other slick fruits, help to express more juice. The wine maker mixes rhubarb juice with sugar, adds water and yeast, and allows the mixture to ferment from three to six weeks. Sweet wine uses a higher ratio of sugar to juice than dry wine. The fermented juice is filtered several times and aged for six to twelve months.

Both Don and Les acknowledge that previous generations aimed for higher alcohol content (16-18%) rather than rhubarb flavor in their wines. Don uses a higher percentage of juice than his grandfather did to produce more of a rhubarb taste, while Les uses about 85% juice. In the 1970s, when tourism to the Amanas was increasing, the wineries found that visitors preferred sweet wine (9-12% alcohol), while locals wanted the drier rhubarb wine, closer to what their grandparents had made.

Both Don and Les agree that good rhubarb wine should taste like rhubarb. Says Les, "The minute it hits your palate, you should know it's rhubarb." His secret? "The wine maker has to taste the wine. . . . There are many variables. But there's no high tech to it—you taste it."