



Heart of Iowa Wine Trail

Rachelle H. Saltzman, Ph.D.

Folklife Coordinator, Iowa Arts Council

© Copyright Iowa Arts Council. All Rights Reserved



You know Iowa has wineries, right? Really, you knew this, but maybe you just don't recall where they are, what kind of wines are there, or—let's be honest—why you should bother with Iowa wines.

First, a little history, so you can wow your foodie friends and out-of-town guests. From the early days of settlement, wine grapes were grown here, especially in the Loess hills and in the Amana Colonies. According to Eli Bergmeier, Viticulture Technician at Golden Hills RC&D, the industry suffered three major setbacks within 25 years—prohibition (1919-34), the armistice day freeze (1940), and the introduction the herbicide 2,4-D (1946), which pretty well wiped out any grapes that had survived the two previous blows.

In recent years, Iowa, like other parts of the Midwest, has seen a renaissance in vineyards and wineries. Thanks to some creative, visionary folks around the state, not to mention a boost from USDA rural development funds, Iowa indeed has a number of good and maybe headed-to-great wineries, some that have their own vineyards and others that source their grapes and/or juice locally or from other states. Most of Iowa's wineries use a mixture of locally produced grapes and juice as well as juice from elsewhere to produce a variety of wines. Producing good grapes is the key to producing quality wines.

[The Heart of Iowa Wine Trail](#), featured in the [Des Moines Sunday Register for November 18, 2007](#), joins its sister trails in [eastern Iowa](#), [western Iowa](#), and in the [Amana Colonies](#). This trail, which opens officially in 2008 with its "Sweethearts, Chocolate, and Wine" on the first and third weekends in February, will feature a passport program. The passport, available at any of the wineries for \$25, will include a description and driving instructions to each of the 15 wineries. Patrons who visit all 15 will receive two commemorative wine glasses.

But, okay, besides the chocolate and the glasses, you're still wondering what's up with Iowa wine and wineries. First, as Jasper Winery's Jean Groben stressed to me, get the those old standby French, California, Oregon, and Washington wines (chardonnay, pinot gris/grigio, sauvignon blanc, merlot, shiraz, pinot noir, cabernet) you've been drinking for years out of your mouth and head. Start trying Steuben, a light fruity red; Edelweiss (a reisling-like fruity white that ranges from semi sweet to off dry) or Seyval (a dry white); or St. Croix, Chancellor, and Norton (medium to full-bodied reds), all from grapes that grow well in Iowa's rich soils and dry, hot summers. Those familiar with Missouri's wines will recognize the Norton. For sweet wines, take your pick from Ice Wine (Prairie Moon), Catawba, or a range of sweet concords, as well as fruit and flower wines such as rhubarb and dandelion as well as raspberry, cherry, plum, and more suitable for sipping, dessert, or mixing.



So, where to start? Unlike other day trips, I'm not going to tell you. Instead, here are some highlights from the Heart of Iowa Wine Trail, sites to see, and places to eat along the way. Check out the map at the end of this article and [visit the website](#) for more details.

Like all wineries, each of these has its own qualities; websites provide listings, descriptions, food pairing suggestions, and information about tours. Following the Trail will get you off the main roads and into small town Iowa. At John Ernest Vineyard Winery, on US 30, just east of Tama, you can visit with Kotsas family members and learn about wines not available at retail venues. Bob Wersen, owner of Tassel Ridge Winery and president of the Heart of Iowa Wine Trail association, remarked on the family's innovative ways of solving engineering challenges in making wine.



Tassel Ridge itself, which Wersen and his wife started in 1999 after meeting with a local farmer looking for alternatives to traditional agriculture, regard education as their unique focus. They love to pair their wines with different foods and show visitors how one can enhance the other. Their winery hasn't always been a straight path, but Bob, who prefers "big reds" (their best known is In the Dark, which blends 75% of their own St. Croix with 25% California Sirah), enjoys experimentation in the vineyard and in the cellar "to find ways of dealing with varieties with characteristics that only a parent could love" to make good wines. Wersen's goal is to craft In the Dark with fruit that is all grown in his Mahaska county vineyard.

Indianola's wineries include Iowa's largest, Somerset, which has very successfully used entertainment and its lovely natural setting to expand its business. On the other side of the size spectrum, La Vida Loca, a newer venture, features some unique offerings; jalapeño, garlic, and onion wines are among its forays into the world of cooking wines.

Two Saints in St. Charles, is another new business; with the requisite five years (the amount of time necessary for vines to bear fruit for winemaking) of grape growing behind them, this family-owned winery will open in February in time for the tour.

Newton's Jasper Winery, owned by Jean and Paul Groben and their son and winemaker, Mason, includes a vineyard and winery. Soon to be expanding its winemaking facility to Des Moines, Jasper Winery offers vineyard and winery tours as well as grape-picking and tasting opportunities. Like most Iowa wineries, the Grobens make wines from their own grapes and other in-state vineyards, wine from out-of-state juice, and blends. A family favorite from their own grapes is Chancellor, one of their best sellers and most promising wines. Try locally-produced Maytag Blue cheese with either Chancellor or sweet red Lucy Lane.

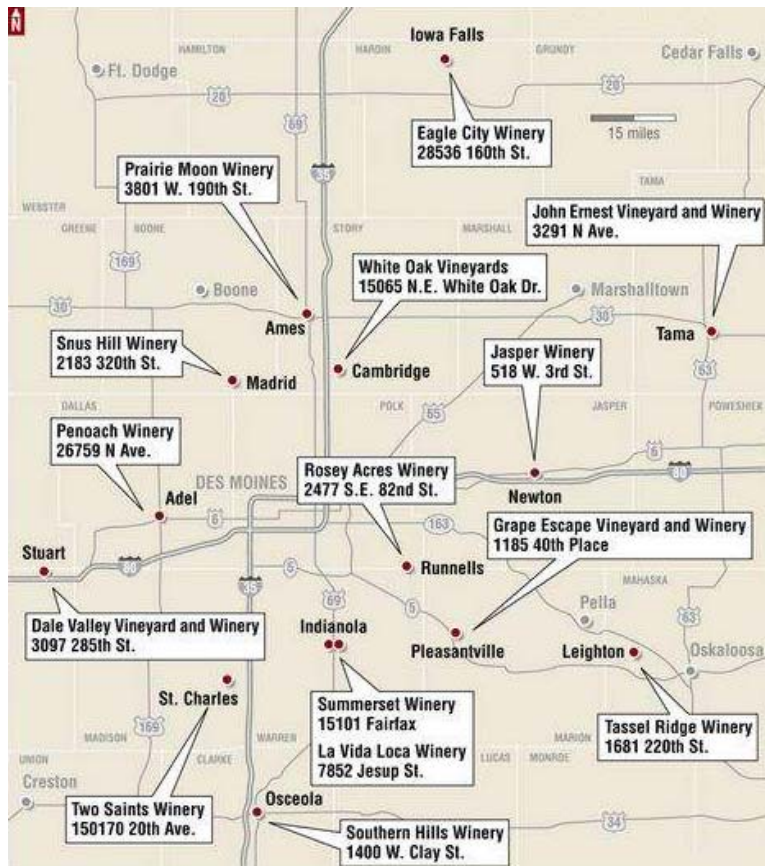


Closer in to Des Moines is Rosey Acres, owned by two families and with a following for its Paradise Mist, a white wine with seductive peach notes. Keep driving west to Adel's Penoach Winery, a farm-based venture with a grape vine nursery. Nearby Daily Valley Vineyard and Winery also opened recently. And White Oak Vineyards, north of Des Moines in Cambridge, is known for its events facilities; the place is booked constantly for weddings. Snus Hill Winery in nearby Madrid, is part of a century farm. Its winery, complete with wrap-around porches, also offers a welcoming venue.

If you've never tried ice wine (traditionally made from grapes that have frozen for three days on the vine, which concentrates the sugars to produce a crisp, sweet white dessert wine), give Prairie Moon's a try; it's wonderful with Northern Prairie Chevre's cheeses and sweet crackers. Prairie Moon also makes dry reds and whites available in retail locations around Ames. But half the fun is visiting the winery and vineyards during

the warm-weather months for entertainment or their tasting room anytime—not just for the wines but also for a selection of art by local artists.

Besides the wineries make sure to check out some local restaurants along the way, such as the Phoenix in Grinnell, Thai Basil in Pella, Oskaloosa’s Peppertree, or the Suburban north of Ames on US 69. Visit Madison County’s bridges and munch on some homemade apple fritters from Winterset’s Bakery Unlimited, which uses Red Delicious® apples (the descendant of nearby Peru’s Hawkeye apple) from the owner’s orchard. Visit Northern Prairie Chevre and meet the goats as well as the cheesemakers in Woodward, Herb and Kathy Eckhouse of La Quercia for nationally-renowned artisan cured meats in Norwalk, Picket Fence Creamery for wonderful cream and butter in Woodward, and be on the look out for more availability in Iowa of Oskaloosa’s Vande Rose Farms’ family-raised Duroc pork (no hormones or antibiotics) and artisan-cured bacon and ham.



If you get weary of wine and food, stop by the Louis Sullivan “jewel box” bank in Grinnell, take a trip on the Boone and Scenic Valley Railroad (there are dinner and dessert trains as well as the regular trips that run by central Iowa’s forests and rivers), or patronize the Octagon Gallery in Ames (right next to the local food co-op).

All of the Heart of Iowa’s wineries offer tours, some of which include vineyard tours with information about planting and harvesting as well as winery tours that teach visitors about processing, fermenting, blending, and bottling. Some wineries also offer the chance to help with the harvest and all offer tastings.

For more information about Iowa’s wineries, visit the [Iowa Wine and Beer website](http://www.iowawineandbeer.com) and/or pick up a hard copy of the brochure from the Iowa Department of Economic Development. [The site](http://www.iowawineandbeer.com) has a listing of over 50 wineries plus breweries as well as maps, a calendar of events, and more.

© Copyright Iowa Arts Council. All Rights Reserved.

http://www.iowaartscouncil.org/programs/folk-and-traditional-arts/place_based_foods/index.htm

Funding for this project was provided by grants from the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University.