



From
GRAPE
to
GLASS

Montana wineries are becoming more than a labor of love

Tasting room manager, Frenchie Leiritz, pours a glass of wine for a customer at the Lake Missoula Cellars.

Vinery. The word connotes France, California, perhaps Washington state. But across the United States, small independent wineries have quietly proliferated. Today no state is without one—including Montana, where approximately eight wineries hum not just with activity, but with passion.

Mission Mountain Winery was Montana's first. Tom Campbell graduated from the University of Montana in 1976 and went to the University of California-Davis to study plant science. He discovered the wine school there, studied both winemaking and grape growing and made wine at several companies along the West coast. Then his father, a doctor, proposed starting a vineyard and winery on property he owned in Dayton, on Flathead Lake. In 1979 they planted grapes and in 1984 began selling their wine. Now Mission Mountain puts out 6,000 cases a year, Campbell says, and he's a veteran when it comes to frost pockets (his first vineyard, close to the lake, happened to be in one), wine competitions (a long line of bottles in his tasting room sport medals) and European grapes that do well in Montana.

In 1998, Judy Chapman started Lolo Peak winery in Missoula, specializing in fruit wines. Chapman plans to retire this year, but Rolling Hills Winery in Culbertson and Flathead Lake Winery in Columbia Falls carry on with wines made from huckleberries, Flathead cherries, raspberries, currants, pears, chokecherries, elderberries and even rhubarb. Hidden Legend in Victor specializes in wine of a different stripe: mead, which owner Ken Schultz will ▶



‘To grow the grapes down here and haul them up to the winery and make something people want to drink – it’s gratifying.’

ANDY SPONSELLER,
OWNER OF TEN
SPOON WINERY

Connie Poten and Andy Sponseller, owners of Ten Spoon Winery and Vineyard, stand amidst rows of vines on their Missoula vineyard, top. Leiritz talks to a customer about the different wines that Lake Missoula Cellars produces, middle. Ken Schultz corks wine at the Hidden Legend Winery.

happily tell you predates wine from grapes, was made in cultures on every continent, and lurks in the etymologies of “meadow,” “medicine,” and “honeymoon.” Schultz blends some of his mead with fruit and spices. He also makes dandelion wine.

Then there are wineries that focus mainly on classic grape wines. Ten Spoon Winery and Lake Missoula Cellars in Missoula put out Pinot Noirs, Cabernets, Sauvignon Blancs, and the like, as do Trapper Peak Winery south of Darby and Trail Creek Winery, which recently opened in Seeley Lake. Like Mission Mountain Winery, Ten Spoon grows grapes in addition to making wine—4½ acres of them, all organic. While Tongue River Vineyard in Miles City plans to start selling wine in 2010, its two acres of organic grapes are already well established.

Winemakers in Montana face many challenges. Price point is foremost. A bottle of Montana wine usually costs more than one from Chile or South Africa. To make matters worse, customers tend to know more about wines from other parts of the world and the country. Among American wines, California’s dominate consumer consciousness and expectations. Then, a plethora of laws regulate alcohol that are different for each state and

various governmental levels, complicating and hampering Montana wineries’ out-of-state and online sales. When it comes to getting their products out to customers within the state, Montana wineries either use distributors or self-distribute. The first option is expensive, the second is exhausting, especially in such a huge state. And while the winemakers praise Montanans for buying local, some wonder how many wineries the state’s tiny population can support.

For wineries most interested in making grape wine, there’s the challenge of the grapes themselves. Intones Arthur Galloway, better known as Topper of Topper’s wine shop in Helena, “Wine has to have a sense of where it’s from, be it Umbria or Walla Walla;” a concept known as “terroir” [terr-wahr], a French term for specific growing environment. But Montana wineries don’t have the option of using Montana grapes exclusively in their wines, not yet. Though more and more farmers are growing grapes in places like Thompson Falls, Kalispell, Alberton, Eureka, Colstrip, and around Flathead Lake, Montana vineyards are still rare and small. In contrast, Montana fruit winemakers can get most of their raw materials closer to home. One producer in Hamilton ▶

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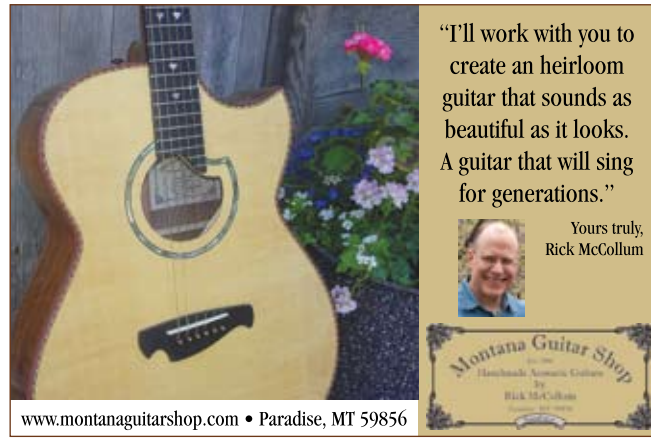
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provides Ken Schultz the roughly 640 pounds of honey a year he needs for his mead. Fruit wines also have the advantage of history. Many Montanans remember making wine from chokecherries, elderberries, or other fruit, or at least hearing stories about it.

Montana's famously unpredictable weather may be the biggest hurdle for grape growers in the state. Dudley Page, a retired doctor, has produced grapes on Flathead Lake since the 1980s. He sells them to Flathead Lake Winery and to Tom Campbell at Mission Mountain, who calls Page the state's "Johnny Appleseed of grapes."

Last year, however, after a June snowstorm, Page let the birds have his whole crop. The snow hadn't killed them. "You can't kill a grape," Page says, "They're hardy." He simply knew they wouldn't ripen in time. That is the main challenge in Montana.

But if Montana grape winemakers can't yet claim terroir for all the grapes in their wine, they do insist on a certain terroir of spirit. "We're not California," says Casey Louis, assistant winemaker at Ten Spoon Winery. "We don't say, 'Wine has to be *this way*.'" Doug Wagner, owner of Lake Missoula Cellars, agrees. "No preconceived notions. We try things and see."

If Andy Sponseller, Ten Spoon's owner, weren't making wine in Missoula, he'd never have discovered his "river bottom road" method of cold extraction (cold extraction is a basic process in winemaking). Like several of his colleagues, Sponseller usually picks up out-of-state grapes in person. "We went to the Willamette Valley to get our Pinot Noirs. We had our crusher and pump and crushed them right off the field into the truck, then drove Highway 12 [along the Clearwater and Lochsa Rivers] all the way back. Those curves in the road, they're our secret weapon. It sloshes them around in the tank. Wouldn't be the same without it." Montana wine, says Bob Thaden, the Miles City winemaker, "is a brand new product. Let's be proud of what we can make right here and not apologize."

The wineries themselves aren't

fancy, just cool rooms with concrete floors, large upright tanks, assorted other equipment, and sometimes oak barrels. Grape winemakers make wine just once a year, when the grapes are ready, though they may taste and tweak for months afterwards. "That means if a winemaker's lucky they'll make wine 20 times," Doug Wagner says. "It all depends on the grape," adds Ten Spoon's Sponseller. "You can take excellent fruit and make bad wine, but you can't take bad fruit and make good wine." Astonishingly, at Ten Spoon and other Montana vineyards, volunteers pick the grapes each fall. "It's the romance of wine," shrugs assistant winemaker Casey Louis. Flathead Lake grape grower Dudley Page grins. "There are friends, acquaintances, acquaintances who've become friends, people from all walks of life. It can be windy, cold. They work till 1:30, then there's a gigantic lunch with fruit of the vine. Next year they ask, 'Do we get to pick again?'"

Despite their challenges, Page and other Montana grape growers are hopeful. In a bar, old-timers told Page that people grew grapes on Flathead Lake in the 1930s and earlier—American varieties, for eating, jam and wine. "This is beautiful food country," he says, waving at his fruit trees, garden plot, and the rows of grapevines marching up his hill. Bob Thaden also believes in the fecundity of his place in Miles City.

Still, Page admits that, for wine, native "American grapes can't compare to French grapes." Research at the University of Minnesota is changing that, however. New hybrids of vigorous American grapes and tasty European ones are cold-hardy, ripen quickly and taste right for wine. Page, Thaden, Sponseller and other growers excitedly discuss varieties with names like Frontenac, St. Pepin and Marquette.

Meanwhile, Montana winemakers persist and keep getting better. "You're going against everything here," says Sponseller, "a market with tons of competition, the California wine template, a small market area. Montana winemakers are intrepid. Isn't that the name of several scrappy warships and the lander on the

moon?"

Clearly they're not in it for the money. Traditionally, in winemaking everywhere, Helena's Topper says, "It takes a great fortune to make a small one." Most winemakers and grape growers in Montana are either retired or have other jobs. Ken Schultz is an emergency medical technician and stone mason; George Nikoloff's Culbertson winery, Rolling Hills, shares a building with his car wash. Sponseller was an industrial welder, Thaden a pastor in Butte. "We do it

for the sheer passion of it," Thaden says. To Sponseller, winemaking is still a business, but "the winery and vineyard are living, breathing things. To grow the grapes down here and haul them up to the winery and make something people want to drink—it's gratifying." Seventy-nine-year-old Page says growing grapes keeps him young and healthy. "Philosophically, working in a vineyard is good for the soul." ■

A frequent contributor to *Montana Magazine*, Beth Judy lives in Missoula.

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