

# Kentucky Wineries

DISCOVER WINEMAKING'S PAST & EXPERIENCE ITS FUTURE RIGHT HERE IN THE BLUEGRASS

by Barbara Meyer





### *First Vineyard*

It's fitting that the legacy of fine American winemaking is continuing where it began - right here in Kentucky. The first commercial winery in the United States, appropriately named First Vineyard, was established in 1799 on 633 acres of land in what is now Jessamine County. Winemaker John James Dufour, a member of a successful Swiss winemaking dynasty, emigrated to the New World where he envisioned building a fledgling wine industry. He chose to launch his dream on an area in Nicholasville surveyed by Daniel Boone.

Dufour, a true visionary, recognized that Kentucky had the necessary environmental conditions for growing quality grapes to establish and sustain successful wine production. Equally important, he saw that the Bluegrass region had enough workers to produce the wine and possessed established trade routes for getting the finished product to consumers. Those consumers included President Thomas Jefferson, who received two 5-gallon oak casks of First Vineyard wine in 1805 from Dufour and his investors. First Vineyard's present owner and historian Tom Beall has collected a variety of artifacts associated with the venture, including original documents, tools, even a beautifully preserved grape dresser's medallion. When Beall renovated the property in 2007, he re-established DuFour's original terraces and included among his plantings, Cape grapes, the varietal (obscure now) that DuFour used to build his vineyards. First Vineyard's current labels honor Dufour by bearing his name.



*photo courtesy of First Vineyard*

By the mid-nineteenth century, Kentucky was the third-largest wine producing state in the country, behind California and Missouri. When Prohibition began in 1920, distilleries and breweries were shuttered, with vineyards closed down and vines ripped from the ground lest the grapes thwart the law by naturally fermenting on their own. By the time Prohibition ended in 1933, Kentuckians had developed a taste for other spirits, and it took many years for local wines to make a resurgence in quality and popularity.

In 1976, Kentucky passed legislation allowing wineries to once again operate, and subsequent government grants and tobacco settlement funds allowed area farmers to examine alternative crops to sustain their family farms. Fifteen years ago, there were less than a dozen Kentucky wineries. Currently there are 70 wineries in the Commonwealth with more on the way, and their wines have won numerous medals in regional and international competitions. Area winemakers learn from and help each other, and University of Kentucky horticulturists study how the many different varietals grown are affected by disease, insect damage, and weather conditions like last year's extreme winter. Industry associations provide additional support, including the Kentucky Grape and Wine



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Kentucky enjoys a number of factors that contribute to the production of quality wines. A longer growing season and intense summer heat allows for ripening potential that yields intense flavors. Smoothly rolling slopes provide the steep elevation ideal for drainage. Native American grapes such as Norton flourish, as do French hybrids such as Chambourcin, Seyval Blanc, and Marechal Foch. Other winemakers have had success with their own versions of traditional European varietals like Cabernet Franc and Riesling. Kentucky wineries vary greatly in size, and winemaking styles are as varied as the vineyards. Some winemakers use estate grapes for all or part of their production, while others use grapes sourced locally or from other states like California.

Dr. Thomas Cottrell, a nationally respected wine authority, came to the area as the University of Kentucky's extension enologist in 2005. Since then, he has traveled the state, assessing wine-making operations to help vineyard and winery owners make their best product possible. "You can't grow all grapes successfully in all places, and in some areas certain grapes won't grow at all," Cottrell says. The key to producing the best wine, he explains, is choosing the proper varietals for an area's unique soil composition, climate, and topography, and letting those factors dictate the type of wine that will be offered.

Fruit-based wines are an interesting alternative to the traditional grape, and Kentucky producers offer a multitude, including peach, cherry, red currant, watermelon, even wine made from the pawpaw, which is the largest edible fruit indigenous to the United States. Fruit-based wines can be more expensive to produce and much harder to make than those from grape varieties. The focus is on vibrant fruit flavor rather than relying on excessive sweetness for taste.



*photo courtesy of Wildside Vineyard*

### *Wildside Vineyard*

"In the past ten years, there has been a big difference in the perception of Kentucky wines," observes Neil Vasilakes, President of the Kentucky Wineries Association and owner of Wildside Winery in Versailles. "People are becoming proud of our Kentucky wines as they're learning what we have to offer. As they watch the number of wineries growing, hear positive things about the quality of the wines, and see our products in their favorite stores and restaurants, they're willing to try something new and taste it for themselves. As their awareness increases they understand what the excitement is about."

### *Wine Tastings*

Sections devoted to locally made wines are expanding rapidly in stores, with even more available for purchase online. However, visiting a winery in person yields vast riches for vinophiles and wine novices alike. You will have an even finer appreciation of that special wine by seeing where it was produced, and learning about the unique growing conditions that developed the grapes used. You could discover a limited production bottling that's only available at the tasting room. Perhaps you will be lucky enough to meet the winemaker and sample a yet unreleased wine through an informal barrel tasting. You may meet multiple generations of a winemaking family, and learn why producing wine is much more to them than just the way they earn their living.

This is your opportunity to ask how weather during the growing season affected this year's crop, how the most recent Cabernet Sauvignon compares to those of previous years, what the farm produced before it was a vineyard, or even what the design on the label signifies. Take a tour, where you'll see the processes that go into crafting fine wine, and visit the fields to learn about the science that's the foundation for successful grape growing. Want to sample a wine before committing to the purchase of a full bottle? Wineries allow you to buy their wines by the glass or try a variety of different ones for a minimal fee. Never heard of American Diamond or Vignoles? Exciting varietals not commonly seen in stores are waiting for you at Kentucky wineries - and one could become your new favorite.



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Wineries are increasingly popular sites for weddings, birthday and anniversary celebrations, family and class reunions, business corporate/events, theme dinners, arts and crafts shows, and live musical performances. In addition to tastings, some wineries have expanded to add lodging, restaurants, gift shops, and even spa facilities. You can sip wine while enjoying a picnic, strolling the grounds, or playing bocce ball or croquet.

When visiting wineries, learn if they offer a wine club. Wine clubs give members the opportunity to get discounted pricing on wines, receive special vintages not released to the general public, and enjoy free tastings and VIP access to winery tours and special events.

Wine is an expression of a winery's unique terroir, and many regional food specialties take on a whole different dimension when they're paired with wines from the same area. Experience locally-sourced meats and vegetables accompanied by wines produced in the same climate and growing conditions and you'll taste the difference.

Ready to start your own journey of Kentucky wine discovery? You can begin by traveling along one of Kentucky's regional wine trails and use the Kentucky Wine Trail App to locate wineries by name or location. You can then chart your own personal wine trail and collect digital stamps on the Kentucky Wine Trails Passport to earn a special Kentucky wine gift. The app is available in both the iTunes Store and Google Play. Hard copy passports are available for stamping through participating wineries and the Kentucky Wineries Association. Before planning your trip, visit winery websites to verify hours of operation. Since wine is a natural organic product, tasting room hours can be seasonal or affected by other factors like harvest and production.

Don't want to drive? Numerous companies offer wine tours, which is a particularly wise option if you want to visit multiple wineries or those in remote or unfamiliar locations. Tours allow you to relax and take in the breathtaking Kentucky scenery while a professional driver, who knows the roads and the area, guides you to various stops. No time for traveling? Sample Kentucky wine at a farmers market, or attend a wine festival where you can try the wares of a number of wineries all at the same location for one admission fee.

"Kentucky's modern wine industry is still incredibly young when compared to the wine regions around the world that most people are familiar with seeing on the store shelves," comments Tyler Madison, the Kentucky Department of Agriculture's Grape & Wine Program Marketing Manager. "In many of the old world regions, Burgundy, for example, producers typically focus on one, or maybe two cultivars and have for the past few hundred years with very specific regulations on decisions like yields and production methods. Here in Kentucky, everything is still very new and there's a lot of experimentation among growers and producers to figure out what grows best and what style of wine may eventually become synonyms with Kentucky as a unique region. Because of that, it's an incredibly exciting time to explore what's being made here as every winery is very unique. Thanks to passionate growers and winemakers as well as the invaluable help from the University of Kentucky, quality is very good throughout the state and continues to improve. The future of Kentucky wine looks incredibly promising."

Kentucky's booming wine industry is a testament to the importance of agritourism. Agritourism allows both Kentucky visitors and residents alike the opportunity to witness and appreciate the labor and skill that goes into producing the quality goods that are uniquely Kentucky. Explore Kentucky's agricultural heritage as you discover our state's many fine wineries!



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