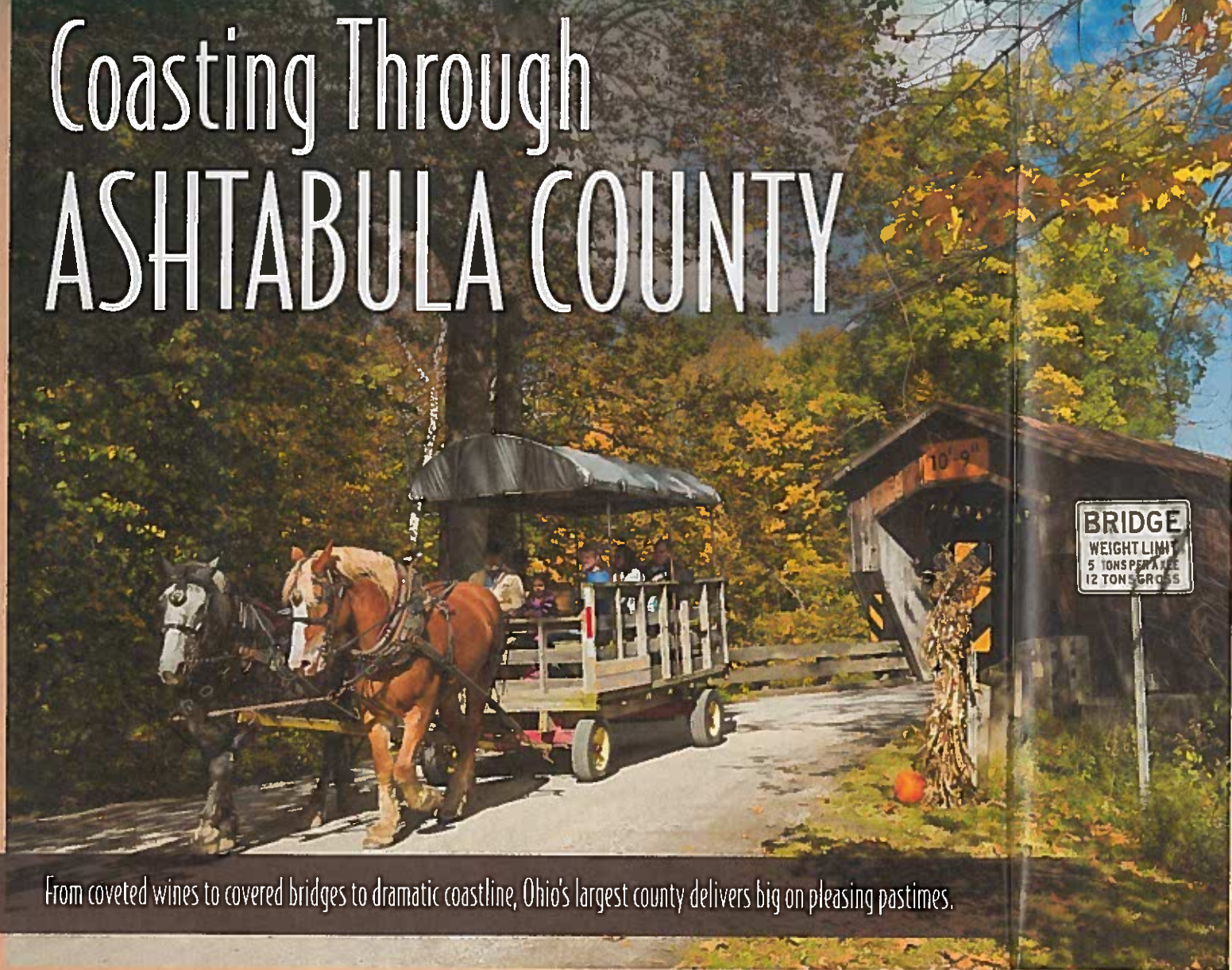
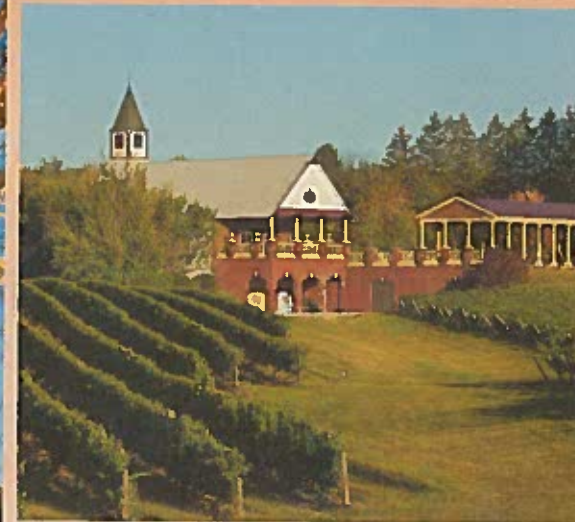


# Coasting Through ASHTABULA COUNTY



From coveted wines to covered bridges to dramatic coastline, Ohio's largest county delivers big on pleasing pastimes.

Benetka Road Covered Bridge | ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF ASHTABULA COUNTY VISITORS BUREAU



Top:  
South River Vineyard  
Bottom:  
Fishing is a favorite pastime in the region



culinary destination with restaurants offering everything from barbecue to seafood to steaks.

The famed Bascule Lift Bridge, from which the street gets its name, is close by. A type of fast-rising drawbridge (similar to London's Tower Bridge), Ashtabula's Bascule bridge is among only a handful remaining in the U.S. and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. A prime spot to watch the bridge in action is on a stairway ascending the hill behind Bridge Street, where you can also enjoy a stunning view of the harbor. Just steps away is the Ashtabula Maritime Museum, outlining nautical history in the Great Lakes. Farther down the street is Hubbard House, where escaping slaves made their last stop on the Underground Railroad before crossing the lake to Canada and freedom.

East of Ashtabula, the shoreline becomes more rugged, terrain that's put to good use in Conneaut, near the border of Pennsylvania. Each August, Conneaut hosts one of the world's largest reenactments of D-Day with thousands of reenactors and tens of thousands of spectators. The town's bluffs serve as stand-ins for those on the coast of Normandy. At other times, the nearly half-mile-long sandy beach, the largest in the county, is a favored place for birdwatching during the spring and fall migrations, and in the summer, it's a popular spot for picnicking, sunbathing and fishing. With the purchase of a \$5 permit, visitors can even drive a car right onto the beach.

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ith 26 miles of unspoiled Lake Erie coastline, a concentration of wineries that arguably makes it the Napa Valley of the East, and an abundance of charming covered bridges, Ashtabula County, tucked in Ohio's extreme northeast corner, is not only the state's largest county in physical size but also one that offers bountiful diversions.

A drive along the Lake Erie shoreline is a superlative way to sample the area's nautical heritage. Ohio State Route 531 stays within constant sight of what many call

"The North Coast," passing four public beaches and two lighthouses and taking in a trio of towns with distinctive character.

Start in Geneva-on-the-Lake, which bills itself as "Ohio's first summer resort." Celebrating its 150th anniversary in 2019, the town originally was a place where Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone and John D. Rockefeller met annually in the early 1900s to fish and hunt. Over time, the town transformed itself into a mecca for families who came to rent the countless little cottages at

water's edge and to enjoy the Coney Island flavor of The Strip.

Arcades, mini-golf courses, go-kart operations and a new zip line sit alongside ice cream and pizza shops and even a dinner theater inside a Swiss chalet. It would be criminal not to stop to enjoy a hot dog at Eddie's Grill or a freshly glazed doughnut at Madsen's Donuts, traditions for families that go back decades.

Views of waves crashing on the shore are abundant along the drive eastward to the city of Ashtabula,

a deep-water port that was once a bustling stopover for freighters picking up coal and delivering iron ore to stoke the steel mills in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Youngstown, Ohio. Bridge Street, a two-block-long stretch of 19th-century brick commercial buildings with elaborate cornices, is an inviting place to pause. Once filled with more than four-dozen bars and brothels frequented by workers in the port at the turn of the 20th century, Bridge Street has in the last decade transformed itself into a

By Rich Warren

### Uncorking the County

Some two-dozen welcoming wineries have also helped to put Ashtabula County on the vacation map. Due to the protecting influence of Lake Erie, the region has the longest grape-growing season in Ohio—some 190 to 200 days—and the fertile soil and topography protecting the vineyards make for ideal conditions for producing grapes. When Arnie Esterer established Markko Vineyards outside Conneaut in 1968, he pioneered the planting of high-quality European vinifera grapes in the region. Nowadays, award-winning pinot gris, rieslings, pinot noirs, chardonnays and cabernets are not uncommon in a region that produces well over half of Ohio's grape crop.

Many of the wineries are lined up like ducks in a row along roads abutting the Grand River, a national Wild and Scenic River in the western half of the county that's known for its dramatic escarpments. Those wineries range from large vineyard estates such as Ferrante Winery & Ristorante outside Geneva and Debonné Vineyards in Madison to smaller boutique establishments such as Laurentia Vineyard and Winery, Laurello Vineyards, Kosicek Vineyards, and M Cellars, all clustered in a lineup of wineries along South River Road and State Route 307.

Many wineries offer cellar tours and a robust calendar of events, including the annual Ice Wine Festival sponsored by five wineries in early March, which features a sweet dessert



wine made from grapes harvested after they've frozen.

For those who aren't wine lovers, Debonné has added a craft brewery, and Red Eagle Distillery adjacent to South River Vineyard produces craft vodka, bourbon and whiskey.

### Connecting the County

As you explore the nooks and crannies of the county, you'll also be greeted by many of its 19 covered

bridges, all but 2 of which can be driven across. Fourteen of those bridges are more than 100 feet long, and the county's collection includes the nation's longest covered bridge—the Smolen-Gulf Bridge, stretching 613 feet long and soaring 93 feet above the Grand River—and the nation's shortest covered bridge—the 18-foot-long West Liberty Bridge. For a self-guided driving tour that you won't soon forget, visit during

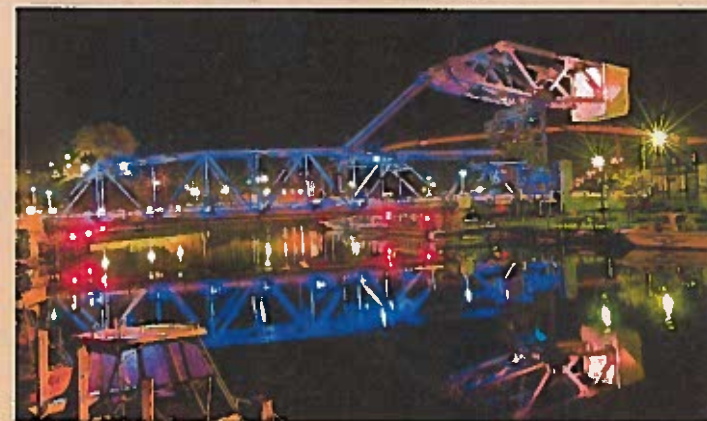


Clockwise from top: There are 19 covered bridges in Ashtabula County.

Riverview Covered Bridge

Sunset along the coast.

Basculle Lift Bridge



the annual Covered Bridge Festival in October, when the colors of fall foliage are at their peak.

And as you're wandering the scenic roads, take time to explore a few of the 14 parks around the county as well as the 27-mile-long Western Reserve Greenway Trail, a rails-to-trails byway used for hiking and biking in the summer and snowmobiling in the winter. The Nature Conservancy's Morgan Swamp Preserve near Rock Creek has three miles of trails along the Grand River and through a hemlock swamp where it's possible to spot

otters, beavers and wild turkeys. Also explore the Victorian Perambulator Museum in Jefferson, where more than 250 antique baby carriages and vintage toys and dolls are on display, and in Windsor, visit the world's-largest statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe, standing more than 50 feet tall and adorned with 450,000 mosaic tiles.

Enjoy a Lake Erie sunset, savor prize-winning wines beside hilly vineyards, or point your horseless carriage across bridges that actual horses once crossed. These are only a few of the adventures in Ashtabula County.