

Sip MEET THE WINEMAKER

PREPRESSED ONLINE

FOR THE OFFICIAL GUIDE TO OHIO WINES

JOHN MOORE & KATHLEEN JONES

PICTURED: Co-owner Matt Vodraska tends to apple trees, as well as grape vines, at Bent Ladder Cider and Wine. RIGHT: Order a flight to sample Bent Ladder's wide variety of beverages and pick up a bottle to take home.



Bent Ladder Cider and Wine

CANAL COUNTRY REGION



BY RICH WARREN

ALTHOUGH WINEMAKERS ANYWHERE SHARE SIMILAR CHALLENGES IN CRAFTING THEIR PRODUCTS, THEY'VE ALL COME TO THEIR PROFESSION BY DIFFERENT MEANS AND PRACTICE THEIR ARTISTRY IN DIFFERENT WAYS. WE TALKED TO SEVEN WINEMAKERS, BOTH VETERANS AND NEWCOMERS, FROM EVERY CORNER OF THE STATE AND FROM ALL SEVEN OF OHIO'S WINE REGIONS, TO HEAR THEIR STORIES.

In 2005, the Vodraska family purchased a former orchard in Wayne County that had fallen into disrepair, with only a handful of the apple trees still producing fruit. The Vodraskas replanted many of those apple trees, now growing more than a hundred varieties — many of them heirlooms — on 55 acres of their land. But as son and co-owner Matt Vodraska soon recognized: “Good apple land is also good grape land.” He saw to it that grapevines were planted on the property, rigorously trained himself in winemaking, and when Bent Ladder Cider and Wine opened in 2016, customers could choose from a wide variety of beverages.

Hard ciders at Bent Ladder include a hopped variety as well as others blended and fermented with fruits like brambleberries and cherries. The 13 wines Vodraska makes are all produced from French hybrid varieties like Vidal Blanc, Seyval, Traminette and Chardonnay, all crafted to be balanced and food friendly. “I’m a big believer that wine should be consumed with food,” Vodraska says. He also believes wine should be geographically specific, reflecting the strengths of what the land can produce. And the Vodraskas’ land is blessed with a unique microclimate, its south-facing slopes underlain by a deep loamy soil. Vodraska uses a scientific approach in his winemaking, making incremental adjustments to see what works best, all to showcase the best of what each season delivers.


About a third of Bent Ladder's customers come seeking cider, with another third looking for good wine. The remaining third are content to sample both, but with such variety in what they sell, Vodraska admits “We’re kind of a rarity. People have never seen anything like us.” With the aim of producing world-class ciders and wines, he is especially pleased to watch customers’ reactions when they take their first sip of his wine. “I love to see their eyes open wide with amazement that such a good wine came from Ohio!” he says.



FUN FACT: The many events taking place at Bent Ladder include such unique happenings as a “Sip and Paint Your Pet Workshop” and “Sip and Create: Live Terrarium Workshop.”

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Sip MEET THE WINEMAKER

Stoney Ridge Winery

VINO REGION



Long rows of grape arbors line the driveway leading back from County Rd. 16 to the rustic tasting room at Stoney Ridge Winery outside Bryan. The first winery in Northwest Ohio when it opened in 2002 and still the only one in Williams County, Stoney Ridge is worth seeking out. Those grapes grown on-site comprise 80 to 90 percent of what Stoney Ridge uses to produce its 15 varieties of wine, including its popular Barn Dance series of sweet red, white and blush wines.

Winemaker Ryan Towne, son of owner Pam Ledyard, says he takes a “common sense” approach to his art, taking what nature has given him each year to create the winery’s array of offerings. Techniques he uses in that transformation include harvesting the grapes for pH and not sugar levels as well as chilling the grapes before processing them, procedures he learned in workshops offered from Ohio State University Extension. “There’s definitely a story in every bottle,” he says. “But I do like to think that we grow excellence.”

Stoney Ridge’s other offerings include its award-winning Slap Happy carbonated hard cider produced from locally-grown apples, as well as several fruit wines, including Country Rhubarb, Cranberry Tart and Blueberry Crisp. Frontenac, an estate varietal, is part of Stoney Ridge’s lineup.

Whatever he creates, Towne says his principal pleasure is to harvest the grapes, process them and then to eventually taste the fruits of his own labors. “But there’s not much time to sip and savor,” he says. “It always seems like the next challenge is just on the horizon.”



FUN FACT: Towne also constructed the two bars found in Stoney Ridge’s tasting room, using repurposed barn wood and concrete for their surfaces.



PICTURED: Long rows of grape arbors lead from County Rd. 16 to Stoney Ridge Winery. ABOVE: Winemaker Ryan Towne and his wife Abbey mingle with guests.



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STONEY RIDGE WINERY VINEYARD - ABBEY TOWNE, RYAN AND ABBEY TOWNE, AFRIDINGS



Dutch Creek Winery
APPALACHIAN REGION



FUN FACT: Athens is famed for its “30 Mile Meal Project,” which stresses the use of extremely local products. “Our honey and our fruit couldn’t get much more local,” laughs Paul Freedman. “Our hives and our orchard are just up the hill from our winery!”

Dutch Creek just opened its tasting room in the countryside outside Athens in December 2019, making it one of Ohio’s newest wineries. But the wines made there are another claim to distinction. Husband and wife team Paul and Cindy Freedman make both meads — wines made with honey — as well as fruit wines, using honey from beehives and fruit from the orchard located on their adjacent farm.

Not surprisingly, most meads are quite sweet, but the Freedmans concentrate on making a drier version, often mixing in other flavors, as they do in their Summer Peach mead or in their Royal Affair mead, which blends the honey wine with tea. Their goal is to create wines that make for easy pairings with food. The Cherry Lime wine goes well with blue-veined cheeses or dry cured meats, for example. The Blueberry Lemon wine is both sweet and tart. “We don’t get the acids that wines from grapes have, so we try to add balance with things like citrus fruit to give it a zing,” Paul explains.

Before opening their tasting room, the Freedmans traveled widely to study how other wineries were marketing themselves. They came home from Kentucky with the idea of aging some of their mead in bourbon barrels, and in California’s Napa region, they sat and people watched, analyzing how the ambiance

ABOVE: Paul Freedman tends the hives at Dutch Creek Winery. RIGHT: Honey is a key ingredient in their mead and fruit wines, with the bees pollinating fruit trees.

was contributing to visitors’ enjoyment of their experience. Their goal in their own tasting room was to create a homey environment that would feel both comfortable and familiar to their guests. Board games are made available, and outside, a wide lawn overlooking Dutch Creek is a place where Frisbees can be thrown or children can frolic.

In 2020, the Freedmans plan to introduce a line of hard ciders available on tap and also a honey soda for those guests wishing to avoid alcohol. Eventually, they’d like to add a pollinator garden to reinforce for their guests the importance of bees to what they’re drinking.



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PAUL FREEDMAN: LAUREN MODDER, AMERICAN MEAD, DUTCH CREEK WINERY



PICTURED: Visit with friends outside at Valley Vineyards. RIGHT: Lee Klingshirn enjoys making relationships with guests.



Valley Vineyards

OHIO RIVER VALLEY REGION



Valley Vineyards, located outside Morrow in Southwest Ohio, is the second-largest estate winery in Ohio, growing 35 varieties of American, vinifera and French hybrid grapes on 70 acres and producing nearly two dozen kinds of wine. Valley Vineyards builds on a proud tradition of grape growing and wine production in the Ohio River Valley, an industry which flourished in the 19th century but was decimated by disease, the Civil War and Prohibition.

Recognizing their land in the Little Miami River had optimal climate and soil conditions, the Schuchter family opened Valley Vineyards in 1969. Their winemaker, Greg Pollman, joined them in 1984 after having worked in similar positions in Cincinnati and Oregon for 10 years, meaning that Pollman cumulatively can claim an astonishing 46 years of experience. He modestly admits that “after that many years, I’ve got a feel for how to make wine,” but he also recognizes he’s given considerable assistance by the vineyard’s superior soils and climate, longer and warmer growing season, and the maturity of the vines that give him top-quality grapes.

Pollman takes a minimalist approach to winemaking, occasionally tinkering with different yeast strains and making adjustments each year according to what effect Mother Nature has had on each year’s harvest. He’s especially known for his dry reds, including an award-winning Cabernet Franc that wineries with shorter growing times struggle to produce. Other grape varieties include Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Traminette, Chardonnay and Syrah.

Customer favorites include the winery’s “Reflections” series of wine in white, red and pink varieties, although Pollman places his Seyval Blanc among his own personal favorites.

“Winemaking in Ohio is just going to keep getting bigger and better,” he says. “We’ve got a great future ahead of us.”



FUN FACT:
Klingshirn Winery has long supported home winemakers by making available the same quality of grape juice to casual hobbyists as they use themselves.



FUN FACT:
Valley Vineyards hosts wildly popular weekend cookouts where guests can grill their own steaks, salmon or shrimp and pair them with wine — four glasses or a whole bottle per couple — as part of the package.

Klingshirn Winery

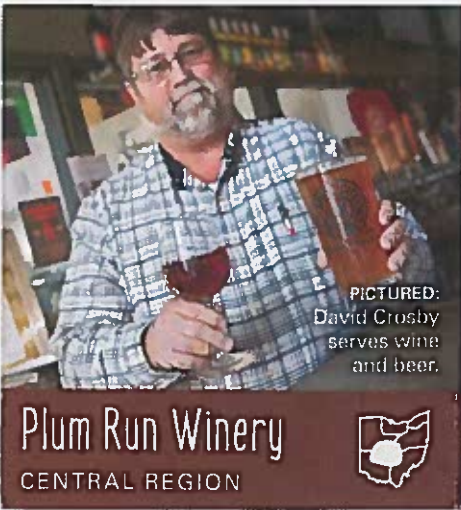
LAKE ERIE SHORES & ISLANDS REGION



In the early 20th century, hundreds of grape farms could be found near the Lake Erie shoreline between Westlake and Vermilion. A number of them were clustered around the city of Avon Lake, where in 1935, Albert Klingshirn decided to use his grapes to make wine, an enterprise that was significantly expanded by his son, Allan, in the 1950s and ‘60s. Nowadays, the torch has been passed to Allan’s son, Lee, a 1986 graduate of The Ohio State University with a degree in Viticulture and Enology. Still growing grapes and producing wine on the 50-acre family farm, Klingshirn’s vineyards and production facility, once surrounded by farmlands, is now encircled by suburban housing developments. In an area where grape growing once flourished, only Klingshirn Winery continues that heritage. “I’m the last man standing,” Klingshirn laughs.

Before taking the helm of the family winery, Klingshirn honed his craft working with the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center, traveling around the state assisting up-and-coming vineyards. He also spent six months in Germany’s Mosel River Valley, where he developed a love for the Riesling wines produced there. He began producing a White Riesling, a varietal the winery has become known for, as well as Reflections of Lake Erie, a blend of Riesling and Pinot Grigio. The winery’s Concord, Niagara and Catawba wines are a nod to the grapes historically grown in the region.

One of five industry members appointed by the state’s Director of Agriculture to the Ohio Grape Industries Committee, Klingshirn was also inducted in 2018 into the Ohio Wine Hall of Fame, an honor accorded to his father in 2006. He prefers to measure success in repeat customers, building relationships one visitor at a time with people stopping in the winery. As Klingshirn put it: “The true test of whether you have a quality product is whether customers return regularly and make you a part of their daily life.”



PICTURED:
David Crosby
serves wine
and beer.

Plum Run Winery

CENTRAL REGION



Beverage choices abound at Plum Run Winery in downtown Grove City. In addition to the 22 wines made from mostly Ohio grapes, an on-site brewery offers an array of craft beers that changes almost weekly and a full-service bar where customers can also order cocktails. Plum Run also has a restaurant offering everything from pierogies to cheese curds, meaning that visitors can sate both their hunger and their thirst.


A former schoolteacher, David Crosby, Plum Run's co-owner and winemaker, learned his craft in college from a professor who was a home winemaker. After purchasing a farm in southern Franklin County where he started planting his own grapes, Crosby and his wife, Diane, toured wineries throughout Ohio and the Midwest, learning what customers were clamoring for. They opened their own winery in 2012, offering both the dry wines that match Crosby's own tastes as well as sweet ones he'd learned some Ohio wine drinkers love.

Embers, a dry blend of Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, is Plum Run's flagship red wine, but newer additions include 3946, a blend aged in bourbon barrels, as well as Sweet Surrender, a Moscato-style white wine that Crosby's customers were requesting. An iced hard cider, a honey mead and fruit wines made from apples, cranberries and blackberries round out the offerings.

Crosby is always eager to guide his customers to make a selection that will please their palate. "It's still the school teacher inside of me," he explains. "I'm happy to teach them about what we've got to offer."



FUN FACT: Plum Run Winery is bursting at the seams. To solve his lack of storage space, David Crosby has found a unique solution — stackable fermenting tanks!



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Kosicek Vineyards

VINES & WINES REGION



When Tony Kosicek opened Kosicek Vineyards near Harpersfield in 2013, he was building on his family's expertise in grapes. His grandfather had established the family farm in 1929, growing Concord grapes for both juice and jam production. In honor of his family heritage, Kosicek still produces a Concord wine but has widely expanded his repertoire to produce estate varieties of Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Riesling, as well as estate Ice Wines using Vidal Blanc and Concord. Of the 20 wines produced at Kosicek's, one called 534, a blend of Foch and Vidal Blanc, is especially popular. "People come from far and wide to get it," he says.

Kosicek considers himself extremely blessed that his winery is situated in the Grand River Valley, where the moderating influence of nearby Lake Erie produces a microclimate especially favorable for grape growing. The

river valley itself as well as the rolling terrain are both conducive to air flow, and the differing glacial deposits of both silty and sandy clay underlying the soil also have an impact on the grapes. "Grapes grown just half a mile from each other can produce wines with a completely different terroir," Kosicek explains.

Because of that, visitors to the Grand River Valley can stop at seven or eight wineries and have seven or eight different tasting experiences. The fact that, like Kosicek's, many of the other nearby wineries are family-owned is another draw for visitors. "People who stop at the wineries in the Grand River Valley may meet not only the owner and the winemaker but also members of their family," Kosicek says. "That's another draw to bring them back, as well as the quality of the wine itself."



FUN FACT: Kosicek Vineyards' harvest of grapes for Ice Wine, which is dependent on grapes freezing on the vine, has taken place as early as Nov. 20 and, as in 2020, as late as Jan. 22.



ABOVE: Take stroll through Kosicek Vineyards. **LEFT TO RIGHT:** Grab dinner with your friends at the winery. The flatbread pizza pairs well with a bottle of red wine. Tony Kosicek pours glasses of Cabernet Sauvignon for guests.

KOSICEK VINEYARDS: KOSICEK VINEYARDS, TONY KOSICEK, PHIL MASTURZO