



USA

TRAVEL

ON THE WINE TRAIL IN Kentucky

America's commercial wine industry was born not in California, but in Kentucky. The 'First Vineyard' was planted there in 1798 by the winemaker for the Marquis de Lafayette, a French general who fought in the American War of Independence. In the century that followed, Kentucky became America's third-largest wine-producing state. Although Prohibition in the 1920s put an end to the industry, today winegrowing in Kentucky is again flourishing: the number of producers has increased from 4 to 70 in the last decade.



KENTUCKY'S WINE COUNTRY IS INTENSELY GREEN, AS IT RECEIVES SIGNIFICANT RAINFALL THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

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Due to the disastrous effects of phylloxera and Prohibition, for generations not a drop of wine was produced by the once-flourishing wine industry in this green, central and sparsely populated state (the size of the Netherlands and Belgium combined, Kentucky has a population of only 4.3 million). It was only in the 1980s that some intrepid growers began to replant grapevines.

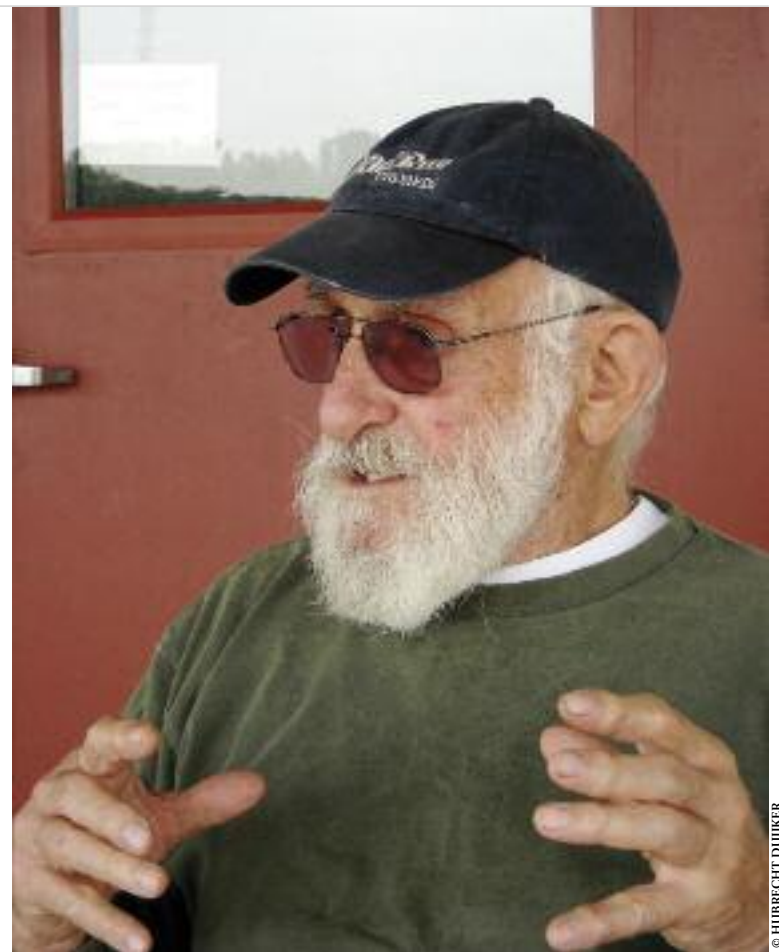
Jerry Kushner, a former engineer at General Electric (he worked on the simulation of the first spacewalk) and wine enthusiast, was one of the pioneers. In 1983, he created an experimental vineyard near Louisville, planting about 20 different European varieties, as well as French-American hybrids. His goal was to empirically determine which could survive the harsh Kentucky climate and produce healthy grapes. The state's climate is characterised by icy winters, with other unfavourable winegrowing conditions including rain during the warm growing season, and late-spring and early-autumn frosts. Miraculously, almost all the varieties did well, even the more fragile European ones such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir. Nine years later, the retired Kushner decided to start a commercial winery, Broad Run. Its vineyards, covering 10.5 hectares, are planted in the limestone subsoil typical of Kentucky.

RIPE WINES

Those who find their way to Broad Run Vineyards, nestled in a landscape of low, lush hills, will be encouraged to taste the entire range of wines, with exhaustive explanations given by the owner himself. The winemaker shuns most hybrids and American varieties, recommended by the University of Kentucky, in his conviction that



RIESLING IS ONE OF THE WHITE VARIETIES SUCCESSFULLY CULTIVATED IN KENTUCKY



WINE PIONEER JERRY KUSHNER, BROAD RUN VINEYARDS

they result in the least attractive wines. The relative old age of the wines we tasted was striking: the youngest white wine was from 2005, and the youngest red from 2006. According to Kushner, this is made possible by the high acidity of the soil, which gives the grapes, and thus the wines, good freshness. True enough, the 2002 Broad Run Chardonnay (not barrel-aged) was still lively and even somewhat reminiscent of a Burgundy. The 2005 Riesling, with plenty of citrus and just half a percent of residual sugar, was particularly pleasing. However, almost all of the reds have been aged too long for European tastes. It would have been interesting to taste them a few years earlier. Only the 1999 and 2004 Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve, both barrel-aged for 18 months, won us over and tempted us to try them with a tender steak.

SWEET BESTSELLERS

Many of the Kentucky dry wines we tasted were ripe, or even overripe. But the state's speciality is its bestselling sweet wines. Most wine drinkers in Kentucky – a state in which it is illegal for wine to be sold by supermarkets – grew up with sodas and sweet iced tea. As a consequence, many producers still have up to four years of production in stock. Jerry Kushner told us, "Our tanks are full."

Eddie O'Daniel, another of Kentucky's wine pioneers, got to know wine as a soldier in the Mediterranean as well as in Napa Valley. His Springhill Winery borders the Bluegrass Parkway, which brings him a lot of visitors. About 20 years ago, he wanted to order vines from some well-known growers in other states, who told him, "We can't


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CYNTHIA BOHN OF EQUUS RUN

help you because we've never shipped vines to Kentucky before." O'Daniel, who is working on a book about the region's wine history, then chose some varieties by guesswork. Zinfandel, Pinot Noir and Muscadine ('Kentucky is too far north for this sweet hybrid') were not suitable, but the others did well, particularly the more resistant varieties such as Vidal and Seyval white wine grapes.

WELCOMING VISITORS

It is notable how many of Kentucky's wine producers have subsidiary activities. At the Springhill Winery Bed & Breakfast, you can stay in one of four luxury suites named after grape varieties. Eddie O'Daniel's son Ben is behind the Jean Farris Winery, where he runs a popular restaurant with his wife, "because wines taste better with food, and that's what we want people to experience." The premium wine of this young winery (established in 2006) is Tempest, composed of Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. It is smooth, with a palate of blackberry and notes of oak. The Jean Farris Winery also has a very pleasant moderately spicy Viognier that undergoes a short period of barrel aging. "It's a challenge to cultivate Viognier in Kentucky," admits Ben. The winery's grapes come from its own vineyard, which covers 4 hectares, or are bought in from the same area.

GROWER-PRODUCERS

Apart from its 70 registered wine producers, Kentucky counts about 100 winegrowers. One of the biggest, which produces wine from an increasing part of its harvest, is Lovers Leap near Lawrenceburg (south of the district capital Frankfort). The vineyard is on a plateau above the Kentucky River and spreads over 12 hectares. Since September 2008, the estate has belonged to Logan Leet, who not only takes meticulous care of his own vineyard, but looks after several others as well. He also supplies other wineries with both grapes and wine. With his own Lovers Leap wines, he hopes to become "the producer of dry Kentucky wines. Perhaps not the most intelligent objective, but I prefer dry wines." We tasted an appealing Vidal Blanc (served out of a blue bottle), which was characterised by citrus

and green apple with some sweet notes, as well as the gold-medal 2008 Cynthiana (Norton), which was dark and massive, with animal and berry notes. The perfectly representative 2009 'G' Gewürztraminer was also awarded with gold.

INVENTIVE SOLUTIONS

To reach the Horseshoe Bend Winery, somewhere in the centre of the state near Willisburg, you'd better consult a good map (so not Mapquest, which repeatedly gave us the wrong information) and follow a winding road that gradually becomes more and more narrow. But once there, you'll agree the trip is worth it. The former advertising executive Greg Karsner has been making several very good wines there for two years, and this summer he opened a tasting room. The small vineyard originally planted by his parents was just over 5 hectares, but it is now less than half that size. It is located in a microclimate with moderate conditions. Generally, the harvest takes place about a month later than elsewhere in Kentucky. Karsner affirms, "sometimes we pick our Cabernet Sauvignon only at the end of October."

The biggest threats to the grapes are deer, raccoons and especially birds. Of course, nets could be used to protect the vines, but Karsner


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LOGAN LEET, ONE OF KENTUCKY'S BIGGEST WINEGROWERS, IN FRONT OF ONE OF HIS NORTON VINES



GREG KARSNER OF HORSESHOE BEND GAVE UP ADVERTISING FOR WINEMAKING

Equus Run supplies specially labelled wines for the Kentucky Derby. Some of their grapes come from their own vineyards or from other regional growers, but half of their wines are produced with grapes from California, Indiana and other states. Other Kentucky wineries also obtain part of their grapes from elsewhere, simply because state growers are unable to provide sufficient quantities yet.

LARGEST WINERY

In a state with a host of other attractions - from museums to horse riding, natural wonders such as enormous caves to a Bourbon Trail - if there is one winery to be visited, it is Elk Creek Vineyards. Lost in the countryside somewhere north of Lexington, it brings to mind the wineries of California, with its huge wooden tasting room, a shop and restaurant, an ample terrace, a contemporary wine cellar and a vaulted barrel cellar. Not to mention a 3,000-person-capacity amphitheatre for summer concerts, a large villa for lodging and a shooting range for pigeons.

doesn't find that an aesthetic solution. He prefers to scare off foraging animals by placing balloons with owl eyes painted on them around the vineyard and making noise by firing a shot every three hours.

Karsner hopes to increase his current annual production of 2,600 cases to 10,000 cases. This of course will only be possible if he buys in grapes from elsewhere. The quality of Horseshoe Bend wines justifies Greg's optimism. Among others, we tasted a seductive, spicy and fruity Cabernet rosé, a lively Vidal Blanc, an appealing Chardonnay made with oak chips, a full-bodied Reserve red (Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chambourcin and Norton), and Goldenrod, a honeylike, rich, sweet wine made from Vidal Blanc.

A STATE OENOLOGIST

The state of Kentucky employs an oenologist, which is very useful since the vast majority of its winegrowers started without any prior training and thus require technical advice. In our tastings, we repeatedly encountered wines with imperfections: too oaky, too much volatile acid, lack of fruit or freshness, or the presence of impurities. These are all likely to be the result of lack of production experience. Often we were served oxidised wines from bottles that had been open for several days and were not protected against oxygen. That sometimes made it difficult to evaluate the wines.

This was the case at Equus Run, a prosperous estate enthusiastically managed by Cynthia Bohn. After an international career at IBM, she started her winery - the third-biggest at that time - near Lexington. Like most novices, she obtained subventions provided by the state of Kentucky to compensate for the decline in tobacco cultivation.



JEAN FARRIS

KENTUCKY RECOMMENDED WINES

From all visited wineries

BROAD RUN

Riesling
Chardonnay
Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve

CHRISMAN MILL

Norton

ELK CREEK

Estate Chardonelle
Estate Chambourcin

EQUUS RUN

Riesling 2008 (moderately
sweet)

JEAN FARRIS

Viognier
Tempest (red)

HORSESHOE BEND

Vidal Blanc
Chardonnay
Cabernet rosé
Reserve (red)
Goldenrod

LOVERS LEAP

Vidal Blanc
'G' Gewürztraminer
Cynthiana

PURPLE TOAD

Chardonnay
Cabernet Franc

TALON

Monarch (red)

Producing approximately 17,500 cases a year, Elk Creek Vineyards is by far Kentucky's biggest wine producer and, as owner Curtis Segretto is used to saying, "the best, too". In order to sell his wine, the businessman, who made his fortune with a chain called Halloween Express, opened wine shops in three regional shopping malls. To produce this volume, he buys grapes and wines from central California and Washington. The winery also makes wines



**THE IMPRESSIVE VISITOR'S COMPLEX
AT ELK CREEK VINEYARDS,
IN THE NORTH OF THE STATE**



JUNE AND ALLEN DOSSEY OF THE UP- AND-COMING PURPLE TOAD WINERY

from its own vineyard - at over 19 hectares it is the biggest in the state and counts for almost 10% of Kentucky's total vineyards. Several of the estate's wines are appealing, for example, a surprisingly elegant Chardonelle (from the Chardonel grape) and a barrel-aged Chambourcin with generous black fruits. However, its wines made from the sweet, simple Concord grape sell as much as all other Elk Creek wines put together.

FROM GOLF TO GRAPES

One producer who hopes one day to equal the success of Elk Creek is located just outside Paducah (known for its quilt museum) in the extreme southwest. There, nine years ago, Allen Dossey turned the former driving range of a golf course into a small vineyard planted mostly with Chardonnay. He named the estate Purple Toad Winery. His wines, particularly the sweet ones, are very enthusiastically received; they so frequently win medals (almost 40 in 2011) that they rapidly sell out. Allen Dossey and his wife June are not fans of overly oaky aromas, which are present in their wines, but well controlled. Their Cabernet Franc is smooth with berry flavours, and their Chardonnay tastes of mild citrus fruit. Both represent the many treats to discover in this state's wine revival.

*Text and photography: Hubrecht Duijker
www.hubrechtduijker.com*

MORE INFORMATION

All the wineries mentioned have their own websites. More information about Kentucky wines can be found at www.kentuckywine.com; tourist information can be found at www.kentuckytourism.com.

In 2010, the World Equestrian Games took place in Lexington, Kentucky, the first time they were held outside Europe.