FARM AID CONNECTION

CROSS COUNTRY WINE

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Photography by Kyle Bice

Over the decades of industrialization, consumers of alcohol became less and less aware of any connection between the products being sold, the producers who made them, and the farmer that grew the ingredients. In brewing, this led to marketing campaigns less about brewers, ingredients, or origin and more about why we should drink Brand X or Brand Y. In spirits, we didn't hear much about how spirits were made, or especially where they were grown. Our awareness of beer and spirits was very much limited to the brand products themselves and some clever ad campaigns on why we should drink them.

We have kept a stronger association between wine and the winery that produces the wine over the years. Wine is likely the alcoholic beverage we most associate with agriculture. Most of us know wine is made from grapes; we know what a winery looks like, and typically, we even understand that grapes are harvested once a year. Despite this agricultural heritage and reputation, the wine industry has still faced consolidation and industrialization, which has influenced consumers' awareness and trust towards wines from lesser known regions, varietals and wineries.

It took some time and good fortune for American wines to earn credibility against the older, more established international wine regions in Europe, most notably, in France. It was 1976 when a couple of Californian wines upended the patriarchy at what became infamously known as "The Judgement at Paris." In a blind tasting by several French wine experts, two American wines were recognized as the best tasting wines in their category. The 1973 Chardonnay from Chateau Montelena won in whites, and the 1973 Cabernet Sauvignon from Stag's Leap Wine Cellars won for reds. This was so startling to the wine world, that bottles from these victorious underdog vintages are on display at the Smithsonian Institute.

Upon hearing the 1976 competition results, Odette Kahn, a judge at the competition, unsuccessfully demanded her ballot back and wanted to dismiss the entire competition as fraudulent. Perhaps this is a compelling example of how xenophobic, or at least close-minded we can be to wine growing and wine making regions.

This American victory via California wines in the 1976 competition was inspired by a confluence of agricultural influence from all over the world-- neither French or Californian. Chateau Montelena's winemaker Miljenko (Mike) Grgich came from a wine making family on the Dalmatian Coast of former Yugoslavia, while Warren Winiarski of Stag's Leap discovered an appreciation for wine on a research trip to Italy, as a student at University of Chicago. Back in Chicago, it was a wine from New York that revealed itself to Winiarski, creating his "Athena moment" and inspiring his move to California to found Stag's Leap vineyard.

(Sources: https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/that-revolutionary-May-day-1976-when-california-wines-bested-france-finest-180958971/)

American wine was viewed differently from 1976 forward. California, and the coastal region to its north, including Oregon and Washington, have long been considered preeminent American wine-growing regions. The Judgment at Paris however, also reminds us to look past the established epicenters and ask, "Where else in the U.S. are we growing beautiful wine?"

Living in Michigan near a few wineries, I am aware that there has been wine made here since the seventies because the Lake Michigan shore contributes generously to a wine-making climate. Yet I notice that many people are surprised to hear Michigan is a wine-growing region, especially when they come across world class wines, as I have. New York and Missouri are also long-standing, yet lesser-known exemplary regions for American grown wine.

In order to dig deeper, and find out what else we're missing, I connected with Doug Frost, one of only four people in the world to hold both certifications as master sommelier and master of wine. Frost is an internationally recognized expert, educator, and author on the subject of wine, and interestingly enough, he lives in Kansas.

Frost's excitement for what's happening in multiple wine growing regions in the U.S. is palpable. To help us understand what's exciting now, he first explained some challenges. *"With a good deal of trial and error, we have figured out where grapes can grow, and how to grow them. Some of the grapes we're growing now, didn't exist thirty years ago,"* Frost said.

"One principal is figuring out how to create the longest growing season before the grapes are ripe, and there's a key difference between sugar ripeness and flavor ripeness," Frost explained. *"The wrong grape in a hot and sunny climate will ripen too soon and lack the complexity of the same grape given the opportunity to flavor ripen. In cooler climates like the Northern Plains, the trick is to find varietals that will survive the winter."*

Frost described some of the progress made in matching grape to climate, as well as creating hybrids well-suited for specific areas. *"We've*

gotten so much better in the vineyard. We've been working with grapes like Vignoles for twenty years, while collectively we've had a thousand years to get Pinot Noir figured out," he said, adding, *"We want to grow the flavors that are in fact, what we want in the bottle." This idea translates to less processing or less manipulation by the winemaker working to extract more desirable flavors or to mask or blend away less-desirable notes. According to Frost, "There's an adage among growers, that the only opportunity after the field, is to not screw it up."*

With varied growing seasons and differing soil types across the U.S., several universities and researchers have worked to take the field knowledge from the last few decades and put it to work in developing varietals specifically geared to do well, based on the geographic strengths and weaknesses. Across the country, American-grown grapes often include unabashed fruitiness as a distinct characteristic. As you travel East to the Midwest and Northeast, the fruitiness is accompanied with an abundance of tartness. Ironically, some of these regions became known for sweet wines, which Frost explained, is often from the effort towards balancing this natural tartness, on the path towards making a dry wine. As this effort and technique has matured, improved grape selection has led to less processed, more natural and more agriculturally relevant, signature wines. Frost encourages wineries to explore evolving possibilities as part of their creative process and adaptation to climactic conditions. *"Developing our own new flavors is more important than replicating a wine from somewhere else,"* Frost said. He lists modern, hybrid varietals such as Vignoles, Brianna, Itasca, Chambourcin, and Traminette as grapes that have given winemakers and wine drinkers fresh opportunities.

Frost considers Missouri, Michigan, and New York to be as well-established, maturing markets beyond the West Coast. He added several other, perhaps counter-intuitive regions that are also delivering on flavor and experience, including Colorado, Arizona, Virginia, Ohio, Iowa, and Minnesota, where Peter Hemstad has been leading a charge towards developing new grape varietals.

That said, one shouldn't rule out traditional grapes and wine styles. James Lester, of Wyncroft Wines, a small vineyard in Southwest Michigan is both a winemaker and grower, dedicated to *vitis vinifera*, the non-hybridized species of grapes known for "old world" wine varietals. When Lester's career began in the mid-eighties, growing these varietals was not the conventional wisdom in Michigan or the Midwest. *"It was assumed that the vitis vinifera, the noble European vine, would not survive here well enough, or give us enough crops to make it commercially viable,"* Lester said. *"Nobody had ever tested that theory, they just assumed it. I read about Dr. Konstantine Frank in New York, who had been growing vinifera over in the Finger Lakes area since the fifties. I looked at the map, I looked at the weather data, and I thought, 'Well if he can do it — then we can do it here.'"*

Lester visited the late Dr. Frank's son, Willie Frank, and returned to Michigan, confident in his mission. "I planted only 100-percent vinifera; I wasn't interested in hybrid grapes. I was only interested in growing the so-called noble varieties, responsible for the finest wine in the world. I really wanted to make wine that rivaled some of the best wines I had tasted from Europe, and I believed it was possible to do it here."

Lester lists macro-factors he considers essential for a wine growing region. The region must include a climate that is hospitable to the grape, and a growing season about the same length as the vegetative cycle of the vine. Proximity to a body of water which moderates the climate is important, as well as decent soil, rich in nutrients and min-

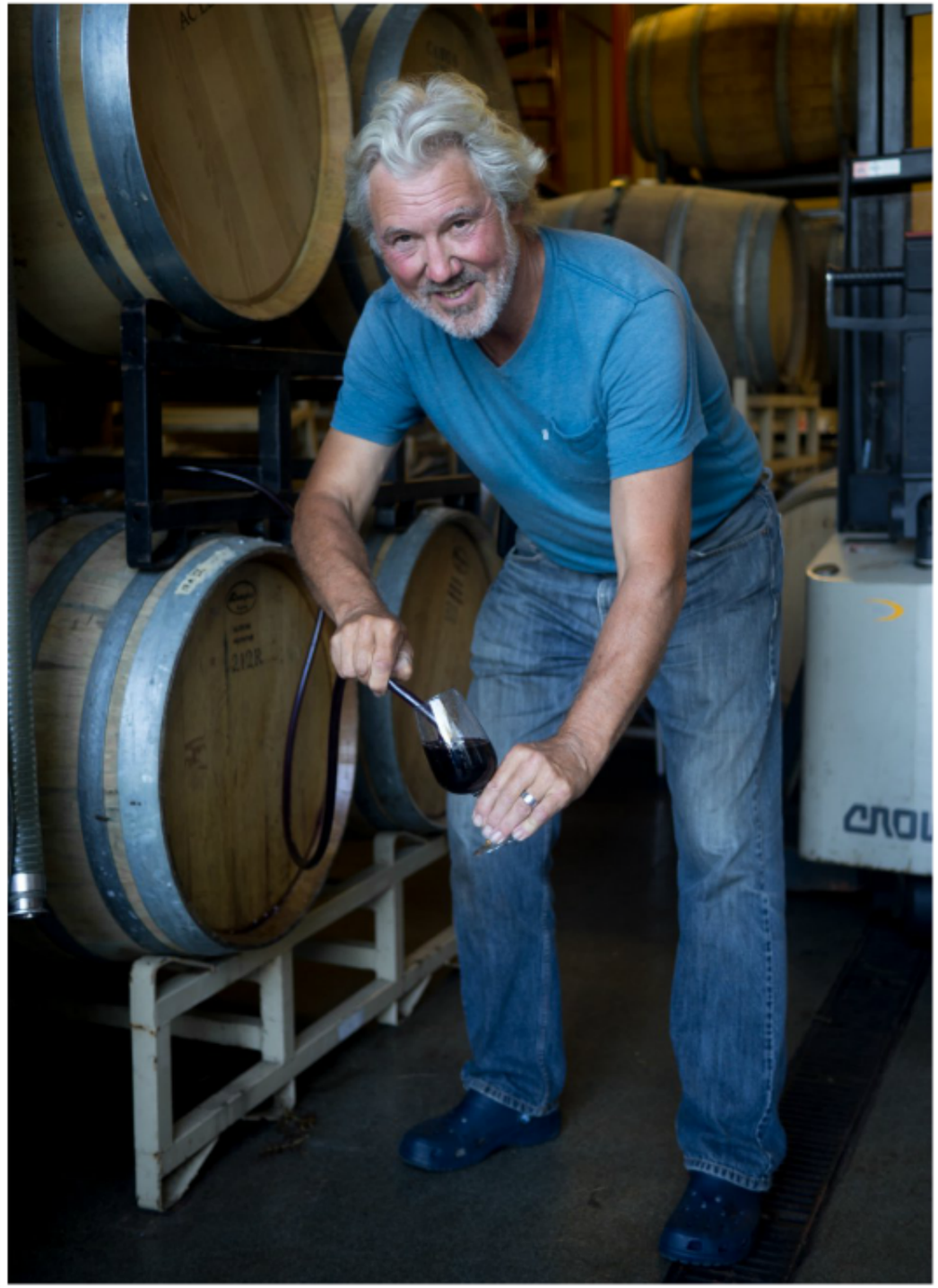
erals. *"All of these factors are found here in Michigan, where we are close to the Great Lakes,"* Lester said. He explained, *"We have these hills that tend to run up and down the shoreline, [which are] comprised of mineral rich clays and stones, which give the vines lots of nutrients. Our latitude is the 42nd parallel, so that's the same latitude as the border of Oregon and California, and the same latitude as Rome, Italy. We're further South than the entire country of France here."*

"The growing [period] that we have from spring to the time of harvest, is almost identical to what you find in Bordeaux and Burgundy in France," Lester said. *"We have some challenges, but thousands of years of human experience show that the vine tends to make the best wine when it has to struggle a little bit."*

Lester believes the cooler climates like the Midwest and Northeast create fresh fruit in the aroma and flavor, whereas similar plants grown and matured in a very hot climate might express their fruit with raisiny or pruney notes. Where Frost applauds fresh and innovative approaches to grape selection without the need to replicate traditional styles, Lester believes, *"Nature does it best. There are grapes you just can't improve on. We should find places to grow those grapes where they feel at home, [and] make great wine out of them. That's been the worldwide search in the New World for the last twenty years."*
In addition to grape selection, there is also the distinction of whether or not the winemaker is growing their own grapes, making "estate-grown" wine. It's an economic reality that many wineries are buying fruit and juice from somewhere else and turning it into wine, which begs the question, *"How important is whether the wine is estate-grown?"* Frost weighed in, *"While focusing on just one part of the process, rather than adding the prospect of farming to the effort can be an advantage; if you want to understand how to make the best wine, you're going to have to work with the same fruit over and over again."*

Lester added, *"The best thing about being a grower, is the control element. Maybe it's an illusion, but I like to think I have more control over grapes on my property, grapes that I see every day. I'm going to do the best I can, because they're my grapes. I'm not going to over crop them, I'm going to take care of them better."*

According to Lester, *"A grower, who is simply selling their fruit...is doing everything they can do to maximize tonnage. The problem with that, is that high tonnage yields don't make the best wine. A winemaker who is just a winemaker, is more likely to get fruit that was over cropped, than a winemaker who is growing their own grapes. That's why all the best wines in the world come from estate grown fruit."*



With Lester's beliefs in mind, it makes sense that wineries contracting with specific vineyards and partnering with growers on an ongoing basis will create more reliable results, versus wineries buying more generic or commoditized fruit from the spot market. This type of information isn't widely available to the consumer, or necessarily on the label, so asking your area wineries about where and who grew the grapes is a valuable question towards building your awareness and achieving a deeper understanding of the wines you're tasting.

Lester, who sells his estate-grown wines under his Wyncroft label, also makes several regional wines under his Marland label, which includes purchased fruit from vineyards around nearby Southwest Michigan. *"I'm not interested in working as hard as I do, to only make a mediocre product, so I am interested in working with growers who understand my quality goals and are willing to go along with me,"* Lester said. He explained how he keeps his illusion of control in place, through a grower contract which specifies criteria such as limiting the field to no more than three tons of fruit per acre, and Lester gets to choose the harvest date. *"I work with them in the vineyard, looking at the fruit and I almost always get high-quality fruit,"* he said.

With all of these facts to wade through, it can be a challenge for wine drinkers to know what to buy, which wineries to have confidence in, and how to keep up with it all. Fortunately, it's a challenge that is enjoyable to overcome. Frost cites the growing number of tasting rooms as the best opportunity for comparative tasting and getting more information. *"So many states are at a level much higher than they were ten years ago. Tasting rooms speak in a helpful language and are reliable if you tell them what you like and what you're looking for."*

Old world or new world, it's clear there are passionate winemakers and growers moving forward in exciting ways. We are growing and making wine in more places and at higher and higher quality. It is important that we don't overlook American grown wines made at wineries in regions across the country. American wineries have set a course for independent, agriculturally-sound beverages long before other categories. They have grown their industry by getting mud on their boots and vines in the ground while also incorporating advanced techniques derived from hours and hours of field work, research, and trials. American wineries have added value to the soil, agricultural jobs to their communities, and delicious wine to our glasses. Expand your horizons and support a grower, by drinking wines from across the country.