

The resurgence of the vineyards in Iowa is a testament to pioneering Iowans who have set their futures on developing the rural economic and tourism potential of Iowa's hardy grapes.

Story by TRACEY KELLEY

On their westward trek for new freedom, pioneers of early Iowa carried with them the seeds of luscious Concord, from the American variety of cultivars *vitus labrusca*. This succulent blue-black grape was hardy on the vine, steadfast through Iowa winters, and sweet sustenance for weary travelers. Homesteaders also prized the Concord's fruity flavor for juice, jelly, preserves, and, for those so inclined, wine.

"The sun, with all those planets revolving around it and dependent on it, can still ripen a vine of grapes as if it had nothing else in the universe to do."

— Galileo

Shortly before the Civil War, the Mormons planted Concord vines in the loamy bluffs of the Loess Hills region as they passed through en route to Utah. The grapes thrived in this sandy, well-drained, and balanced soil. This particular combination produced a distinctive and appealing fruit.

By 1893, the Council Bluffs Grape Growers Association was organized and a mass-production winery established. Before the start of the Depression, 400 acres produced 1,400 tons of grapes annually in western Iowa alone. What began as a supplement to the family harvest table had matured into a viable commercial industry.

In the early twentieth century, Harrison, Lee, Linn, Mills, Muscatine, and Pottawattamie counties were the largest grape producers for wine and juice making, while in Iowa County, the Amana

Fruits of the Vines

BOB ELBERT



...families supported their communal structure cultivating grapes for "old world" wine. Although Prohibition ended in 1919, Iowa grapes were still in high demand throughout the depression into World War II.

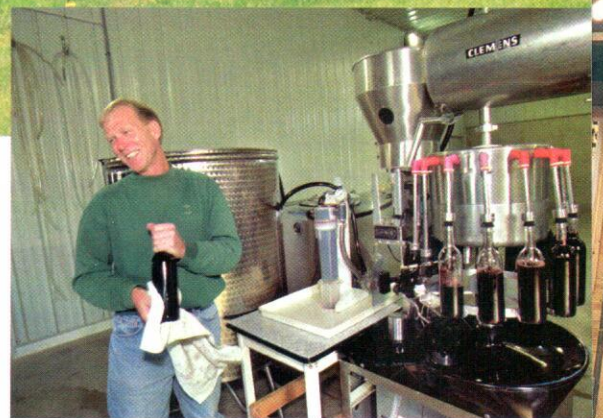
While these vines could awaken each spring after braving the bitter Iowa cold, they couldn't battle the imminent threat of a presidential proclamation and a broadleaf herbicide unable to distinguish friend from foe.

President Franklin Roosevelt supported increased interest and expansion of crops, a boon to other types of Iowa farming because of lucrative prospects of less land management. To support

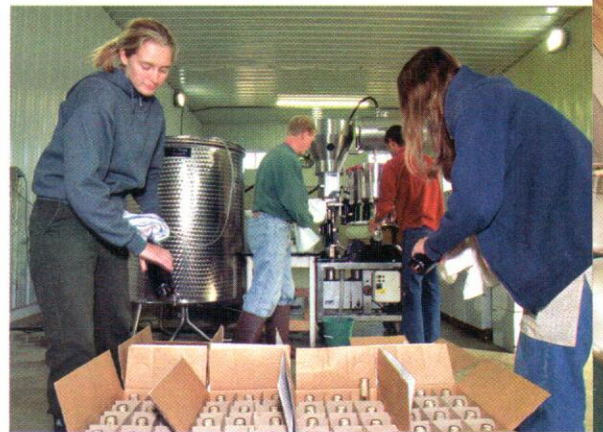
and soybean yields, a herbicide called 2,4-D was developed to eradicate broadleaf weeds. Its widespread use drifted over the vineyards, shriveling the once-bountiful plants. "Wipe out the industry entirely," says Dr. Paul Domoto, professor of horticulture at Iowa State University. "There was no way of knowing 2,4-D would do that." Iowa's previously thriving grape industry lay dormant for a winter that lasted a generation.



MARK TADE



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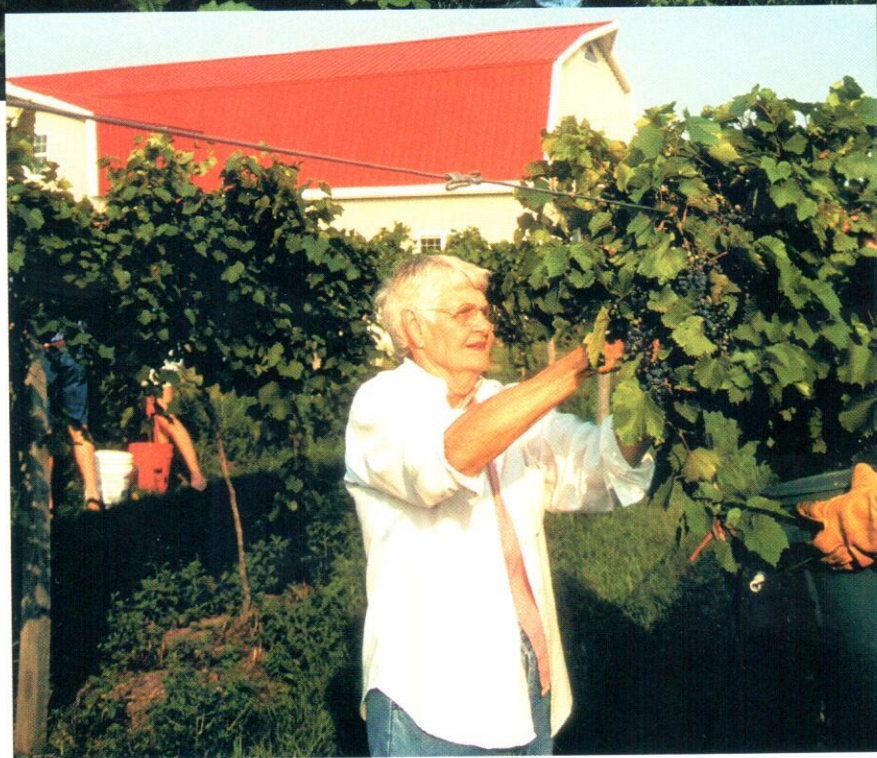


MARK TADE

(Above) After a long dormancy, Iowa's wine and grape industry is making a comeback. Here, scenes from the field, harvest, and bottling at Tabor Home Winery.



MARK POTTER



MARK POTTER

(Above and top) Living and working elsewhere, Iowa's modern-day wine pioneers are tending crops here now, including in fields at Summerset Winery in Indianola.

Enter the seedling pioneers of the new century: Dr. William Brown of Timberhill Winery in Leon, Ron Mark of Summerset Inn and Winery in Indianola, and Dr. Paul Tabor of Tabor Home Winery and Vineyards in Baldwin. The three owner/winemakers were influenced by a heritage of farming, vineyard ownership, and amateur winemaking. These native sons contributed their knowledge of winemaking and grape growing cultivated from living elsewhere to resurrect a once-prosperous Iowa industry.

The grape prospects were more expansive than before. While the Amana Colonies still attracted visitors with the flavor of their "old world" wines, made from a variety of fruits and imported juices, the focus for this new crop of growers centered on French-American hybrid and American varieties, or "estate" grapes. "The Midwestern climate is tough to deal with, but not if you have the right site and the right grape," says Iowa's first appointed viticulture technician, Eli Bergmeier. "It can definitely be an alternative crop to corn and soybeans."

In the early to mid-1980s, Brown, Mark, and Tabor did what they could with what they had. There wasn't much in the way of state assistance, education, or information. So they invented seminars for other potential growers and traveled to other sites around the nation. They suffered

through trial and error, attacks by birds that loved the taste of Marechal Foch grapes, and crop-crippling spring frosts. The appointment of Bergmeier, spearheaded by the Western Iowa Grape Growers Association and Golden Hills Resource Conservation and Development in Oakland, is just one of the many recent changes implemented to assist growers and winemakers dedicated to producing quality product.

When growers speak of quality, it's different than the quality of the European, or *vitus vinifera*, varieties most wine drinkers are familiar with, such as Chardonnay or Merlot. "We won't have those types because they aren't cold hardy," says Domoto. Yet growers are convinced that with time and expert winemaking, "we'll establish a regional identity we can be proud of, one that is marketable not only in Iowa, but elsewhere," says Mark. "It's taking baby steps, but we'll get there."

Varieties such as Marechal Foch, Cynthiana/Norton, St. Vincent, and Frontenac have demonstrated long-lasting potential for reds. Positive cultivars for Iowa white wine include Seyval Blanc, La Crosse, St. Pepin, and Chardonel. "We are also evaluating 20 Eastern European varieties for Iowa," says Tabor. "We're one of the more northern spots for these grapes, so we're looking for winter hardiness and how well they perform during the growing season. Diseases and, of course, all those pressures would be different here than in Eastern Europe. But the deal is . . . they are fairly well-known wine grapes, and even if just one or two of those work, it would really be a coup, because no one else in the United States plants those."

Experimentation is a key component to a long-lasting industry. "Any small winery can have an 'arrow in their quiver' if well made," Brown notes. "One of the things I like most about winemaking is that there's always something more to learn."

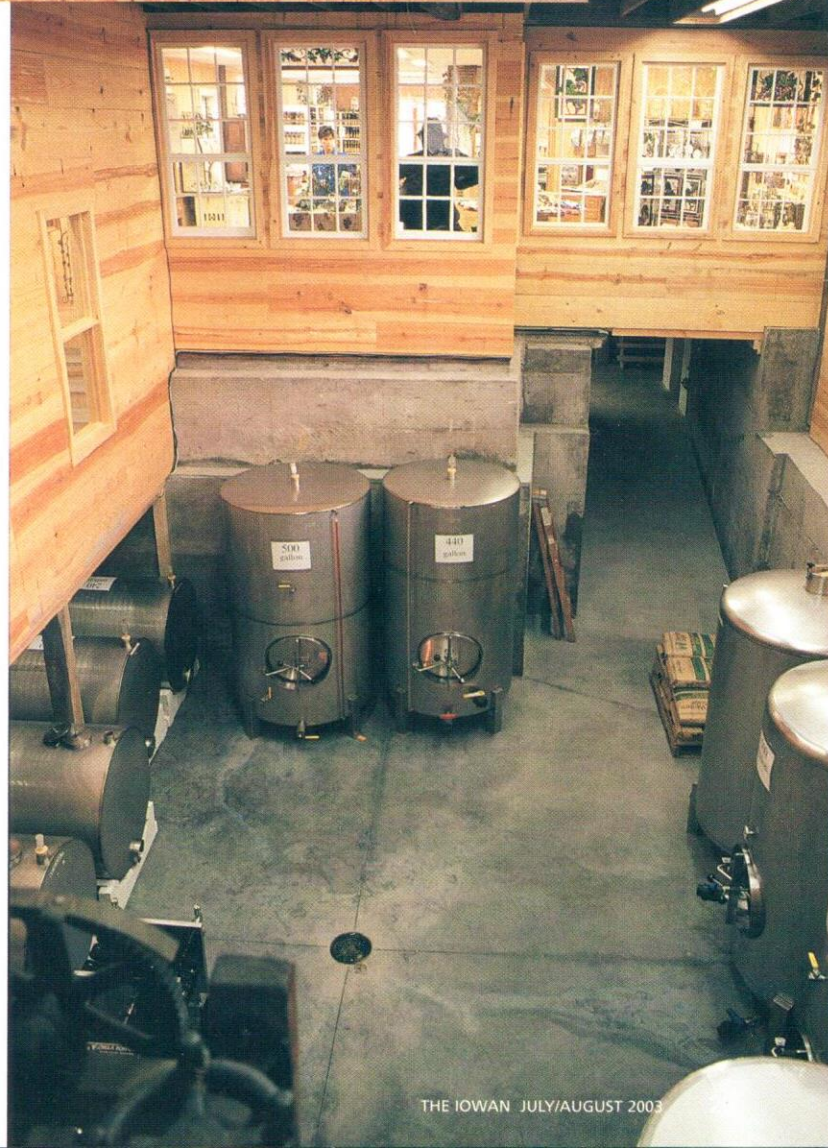
In addition to reds and whites, Brown is currently developing sparkling wines in the *methode champenoise*, or non-carbonated, style. Dr. Kenneth Groninga, owner/winemaker of Eagle City Winery in Iowa Falls, also believes "a lot of fine wines can be grown from Iowa grapes in the years to come," but he couldn't wait for his Iowa varieties to mature: he imports juices from Chile and Australia for some of his blends now. "But I'm working on a Frontenac/Foch blend that I'm pretty excited about," he says.

(Below and bottom) Old world wineries are part of the mix of the resurgence of the wine industry in Iowa; wineries in the Amana Colonies include Ackerman.

MIKE WHYE

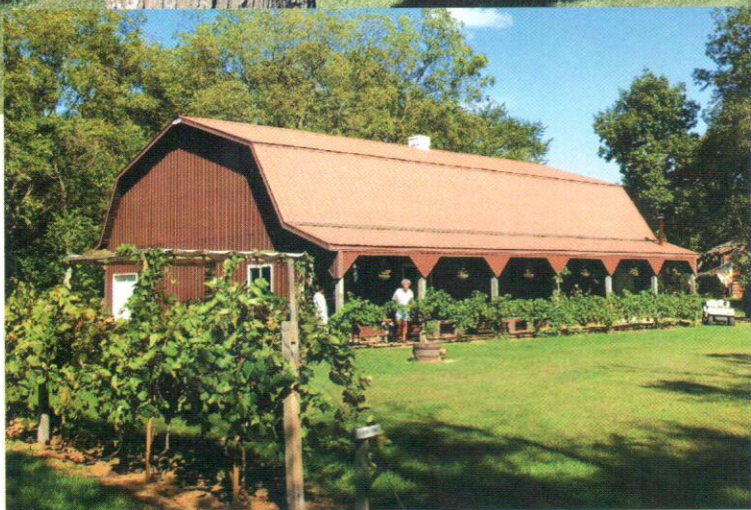


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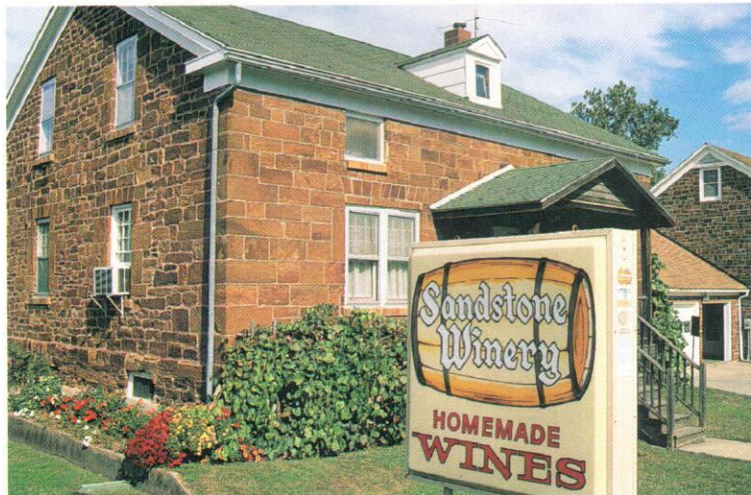




MIKE WHYE



BOB ELBERT



PHIL AUGUSTAVO

(Top) The Old Wine Cellar and (bottom) Sandstone Winery in the Amana Colonies. (Middle) Eagle City Winery in Iowa Falls.

Other growers, like Frank Faust of Faust Vineyards in Thurman, may have the advantage of growing nine strong Iowa cultivars in their loamy soil, but he is also experimenting with “a grafted Chardonnay vine, which I may be able to get away with because I’m in southwest Iowa. But it still has to be buried at the end of each season under four to five feet of dirt, which makes it extremely labor-intensive. But it’s all a labor of love anyway.”

Every grower stresses caution about the labor involved. Aside from the \$3,000 to \$5,000 initial investment per acre, there’s a misconception vineyards are a crop for the gentleman farmer. To the contrary, tending vineyards is a time-intensive process lasting eight months of a typical year. “You will probably need to work at least 100 hours per acre per year to establish and maintain a vineyard,” says Mike White, ISU Extension Viticulture Field Specialist. Mark still encourages growers with a reminder that “anything you can put into a product that has sustainability is going to be like a long-term investment.”

Resources are more plentiful for potential growers now than ever before. In addition to individual regional organizations, there are also the newly formed Two Rivers Grape and Wine Cooperative and the official Iowa Grape Growers Association dedicated to providing continuous assistance and education. “And there’s a real camaraderie among growers and winemakers,” says Faust.

Camaraderie is demonstrated with the singular focus of providing a viable agricultural and economic alternative in a state famous for growing potential. “Missouri, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Nebraska—all these states are ahead of Iowa in the native winery business,” says White. “They understand and support their native wine industries

because of the tourism they attract. The native winery industry involves wine sales, gift shops, banquets, weddings, bed and breakfasts, and tourism. It's all about discretionary urban dollars being spent in rural areas."

Brown agrees. "Rural areas have also missed out on the urban changes. As vineyard owners, as winemakers, our mission is to reestablish economic and demographic growth. Growers will become producers if you can have five or six serious wineries needing their quality product. And then, if you can have five or six wineries along Highway 2, you've got a wine road, with craftspeople, B&Bs, and so on."

Tabor Home in Baldwin, Stone Cliff Winery in Durango, and a handful of other eastern Iowa vineyards and soon-to-be bonded wineries are currently developing a "wine trail," intended for operation in 2004. New wineries will be open in Marquette, Estherville, and Pella within the year, and a dozen more throughout Iowa are in early planning and construction stages. In the Loess Hills region, many vineyards like Faust's are two to three years away from commercial winery development and clustered conveniently for day-tour possibilities.

All this makes new vineyard owner and transplanted Californian Bob Wersen extremely optimistic. His boyhood was spent near prune orchards in northern California. As he grew, so did the region. "In 1965, there were only four wineries in Napa Valley. Now all those prune orchards have evolved into vineyards, wineries, a world-renown wine identity."

Wersen relocated his company to Iowa in 1993 and purchased an acreage between Pella and Oskaloosa off Highway 163 he hopes one day will host 20 acres of prime French-American hybrids.

"The potential for rural economic development through tourism in Iowa is enormous. Scenically, vineyards are very pretty. Add other forms of manufacturing, such as handcrafts, foodstuffs that can be sold in winery gift shops, and wine tours. There are many strategic partnerships that can be formed to tap into real market opportunity," believes Wersen.

Just as the settlers processed grapes for survival, and as the Mormons cultivated the initial vines of a growing industry, these new pioneers also hope to create new life in rural Iowa. "It's a lot of work, and costly," says Brown. "But my great-grandfather was a pioneer in Iowa. He walked from Des Moines to Guthrie County and basically formed Guthrie Center. I've had a lot of reasons to leave Iowa, but I'd rather make it a place to stay." ❖

— Freelancer Tracey L. Kelley is the owner of A Way With Words, a writing and voiceover business in Des Moines; this is her first piece for The Iowan.

Iowa's Wineries

The doors of Iowa's wineries are open to you throughout the year. Call ahead for information on specific hours and amenities such as upcoming events, gift shops, and banquet facilities.

Farm Estate Wineries:

Christian Herschler

Franklin, 319/835-9432

Eagle City Winery and Vineyard

Iowa Falls, 641/648-3669

Eagles Landing

Marquette, 563/873-2509

Little Swan Lake Winery

Estherville, 712/858-4430

Summerset Inn and Winery

Indianola, 515/961-3545

Stone Cliff Winery

Durango, 563/552-2626

Tabor Home Vineyards and Winery

Baldwin, 877/673-3131

Old-World Wineries:

Ackerman Winery

Amana, 319/622-3379

Ehrle Brothers Winery

Homestead, 319/622-3241

Heritage Wine and Cheese Haus

Amana, 319/622-3564

Little Amana Winery

Amana at I-80, 319/668-9664

Old Wine Cellar Winery

Amana, 319/622-3116

Sandstone Winery

Amana, 319/622-3081

The Grape Vine

Main Amana, 319/622-3698

Village Winery

Amana, 319/622-3448