

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 21, 2009

## Wine Trails - Illinois Welcomes Wine Travel Lovers

Much like the surrounding states of Missouri, Iowa, and Indiana, Illinois offers several appealing destinations to wine travel lovers. You'll find clusters of wineries in every part of the state, including metropolitan Chicago. Grapes grow well here, and Illinois vintners display their creativity by making a tempting array of wines that are attracting national press.

Our destination for this trip, the Shawnee Hills Region, is an official American Viticultural Area, established in late 2006. It's the first AVA in Illinois. In essence, designation as an AVA tells the general public the grapes, and wines, are unique and special. Further, wines can be labeled Estate Bottled if 80% of the wine grapes originate from the AVA's region.

As of late 2008, Illinois boasts almost 60 wineries. You're never far from a great wine experience here in Illinois!

### **All Aboard For Wine Country**

In the far southern part of the state, less than an hour from the Kentucky border, you'll find the Shawnee National Forest region. This lush, green, almost rugged territory stretches 80 miles east to west and about 20 miles north/south. The northern gateway to the area is the college town of Carbondale, home to Southern Illinois University and a convenient Amtrak hub for travelers heading to Memphis or New Orleans. We booked round trip service on Amtrak's Illini line and relished the thought of relaxing with a good book and enjoying the Illinois landscape on the way to Illinois' first wine country, the Shawnee Wine Trail.

### **Arriving in Illinois Wine Country**

With a late Thursday arrival and two full days of wine touring ahead of us,

we headed straight for our lodging after arriving in Carbondale. Our choice, which we highly recommend, is the Giant City Lodge, 12 miles from the Amtrak station.

Giant City Lodge, located in Giant City State Park, was originally built in the 1930's by the Civilian Conservation Corps. Local building materials were used, and the lodge itself is a sturdy structure of sandstone and white oak timber. One of the lodging options is the Historic Cabins, which was our choice for our weekend stay.

The "historic" cabins are actually newer cabins which sit on the sites of the original cabins built 70 years ago. These one room cabins are charmingly comfortable and clean. For families, larger cabins are available. The only downside we saw is that pets are not allowed, but if you want to bring your pet, there are several other lodging options in the area.

### **Day One On The Shawnee Wine Trail**

The next morning, fresh off a great breakfast and a spirited hike in Giant City State Park, we headed off to begin our wine exploration for the weekend with a stop at Owl Creek Vineyard. Immediately, we learned why the Shawnee Hills Region is ideal for wine travelers.

All ten wineries are within 15 miles of one another, and while the roads are a bit winding, the scenery is so gorgeous and the air so fresh and clean, the short drives are very enjoyable.

This beautiful region is bordered by the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, and the land is anywhere from 400 to 800 feet higher here than the immediate surrounding area. This in and of itself creates a unique microclimate. It's cooler in summer, warmer in winter, and there's a longer growing season, along with consistent summer breezes which help dry out the grapes and vineyards. The soil drains well, and it's rich in sandstone and limestone. In short, a perfect area for growing grapes!

There are 10 wineries on the Shawnee Wine Trail, and a little simple math told us we could visit them all in 2 1/2 days. Both Friday and Saturday called for four winery visits each, with two left over for early Sunday afternoon. This is an ideal schedule for the dedicated wine tourist. A good, hearty breakfast followed by two late morning winery visits. Then, a stop for lunch and sightseeing, and two more wineries in the afternoon.

And so, our day one agenda consisted of visits to Owl Creek Vineyard, Blue Sky Vineyard, Orlandini Vineyards, and finally Star View Vineyards. This makes for a leisurely, interesting day, with plenty of time to enjoy the scenery and a local lunch stop.

Our first stop on the trail is Owl Creek Vineyard, located just over 4 miles from Giant City State Lodge. Open since 1995, this family operated vineyard and winery uses grapes that are well known in this region, like Chambourcin, Norton, Seyval Blanc, Chardonnell, and a new favorite of ours, Villard. Owl Creek is a true taste of southern Illinois, as all wines are made with grapes grown in this area.

For starters, we liked ChardonOwl, a toasty white in the Chardonnay style and made with Chardonnell grapes. From the red side, try Owl's Leap, a great Chambourcin style wine with hints of clove and anise. Every wine here is filled with depth and intrigue. We recommend you find out if Owl Creek can ship to your state, as their wines are great examples of the Shawnee Region AVA.

When you leave Owl Creek, proceed three miles up Water Valley Road and you'll arrive at Blue Sky Vineyard, our second stop of the morning. This is one of the most beautiful winery settings on this or any other wine trail. A large Tuscan style winery building and tasting room set the stage, with two outdoor terraces overlooking row after row of vines.

We were a bit early for lunch, but Blue Sky is a perfect stop if you're hungry. Items like pulled pork on a croissant, pizza, and chicken salad

round out a nice menu, and of course, there are numerous wines for you to taste!

Our favorite was Infinity, a semi dry white made with Geisenheim grapes. All sorts of fruit flavors will dance with your taste buds - we sensed ripe melon and grapefruit. Perhaps even more outstanding was the Chambourcin Reserve, a multiple award winner that just might be the best of this style we've had. We loved the dark cherry flavors mingling with rich dark spices, along with a burst of vanilla mid palate.

Now it was off to Orlandini Vineyard, where we planned a picnic lunch by their peaceful vineyard pond. Orlandini's location is atop one of the highest ridges in southern Illinois, so be prepared to be impressed by the view.

With plenty of time on our hands, we decided to split a bottle of Orlandini's White Chambourcin. A white chambourcin is created by removing grape skins during the early part of the wine making process. The result is an almost blush colored wine with all the spicy fruit stylings of a good Chambourcin. We left with two bottles to add to our Illinois wine collection, along with a bottle of Vidal, a semi dry white full of grapefruit flavor.

Later on Friday afternoon, we visited our final winery of the day, Star View Vineyards. This is another perfect place to enjoy a glass of wine outdoors. There's a large, expansive deck that overlooks koi ponds and the surrounding countryside. Make sure to visit the gift shop here, as there are all sorts of one of a kind gifts for those on your list!

We visited on a beautiful fall day, so we decided to buy a glass of wine each and enjoy the deck. The two Star View wines we tried were Silver Star, a white, and Norton, a red.

Silver Star is an easy sipper, slightly sweet. It's a blend of white grapes, with Niagara in the forefront. We were intrigued by the Norton, a style

common to nearby Missouri wineries. We found Star View's Norton exceptional, bursting with dark fruit flavors and complex on the palate. What a perfect happy hour!

There are numerous small towns in the area with local restaurants, so you'll have plenty of choices if you want to wander. Also, it's well worth noting the charming town of Cape Girardeau, Missouri is only 25 miles away. We visited there late Sunday morning and early afternoon. There's a French influence in Cape Girardeau and it's well worth your time if you're a fan of historic river towns.

## **Day Two On The Trail**

Saturday brought us the opportunity to visit the western side of the Shawnee Wine Trail. After another brisk morning hike, our first winery of the day is Inheritance Valley in the small hamlet of Cobden. Cobden is 2 miles south of the more well known Alto Pass, and 7 miles north of Jonesboro.

Open since 2003, Inheritance Valley offers a pleasant tasting room and free tasting of six wines. We decided to splurge a bit and buy a wine glass and unlimited tastings for \$3 each.

We really enjoyed our time here because Inheritance Valley offers a real sample of southern Illinois. Almost all of their grapes and other fruits are locally grown. When you stop here, be sure to try the various port wines as they are a house specialty.

Our favorite Inheritance Valley wine was Two Worlds. This off dry red wine is a blend of two grapes that do very well here, Cabernet Franc and Norton. Another very enjoyable choice was Roadside Red, a little sweeter and softer on the palate.

Next on the agenda was the unofficial wine center of southern Illinois, Alto

Pass. Here you'll find three wineries - Hedman Vineyards, Alto Vineyards, and Von Jakob Winery. You can easily visit all three in one afternoon, they are that close to one another. If you arrive at lunch time as we did, Hedman is a great place to start. You can enjoy an old fashioned Swedish lunch at the Peach Barn, on the winery grounds and quite well known in these parts.

Hedman Vineyards is one part bed and breakfast, one part cafe, and one part winery. It's a unique destination and one of the most popular attractions in the area. Do eat here if you get a chance. We stopped for lunch and among other delicacies enjoyed the sampler platter. This Swedish delight offered tastes of all the following: pickled herring, creamed caviar, Swedish meatballs, lingonberries, and hardboiled eggs. You can also indulge on a very good pecan crusted chicken breast salad, served with warm homemade bread.

The tasting room is adjacent to the cafe, and we recommend the Chambourcin and the Tucker Hill Red. Chambourcins are prominent here, and in neighboring Missouri. Full bodied, spicy, and smooth, this was a winner. For something slightly sweeter, Tucker Hill Red fits the bill. It's a blend of Chambourcin and Concord, with neither grape dominating the flavor.

Alto Vineyards has long been on our radar. It's the oldest and largest winery in the area and one of the most well known and respected in Illinois. This pioneering winery was the first to plant grapes for commercial wine production in the early 1980's.

We noted the Alto wines are widely available around the area, but you really should stop here if you're in this neck of the woods. There's a relaxed, peaceful vibe and it's a great place to spend an hour or two. The gift shop is stocked with unique specialty foods and you can relax on the grounds with a glass of Alto wine for only \$3.

We particularly enjoyed the white wines here, perhaps because we focused on reds at Hedman. Nonetheless, you won't go wrong with Heartland White, a semi dry offering with the pleasant scent of lemon petals and apple palate. Another favorite was Wiener Dog White, a charming blend of several grapes with pear and mango tones. If you're so inclined, buy a few bottles to go. Prices are reasonable!

Saturday afternoon's last winery was Von Jakob Winery, where you can cozy up to the indoor or outdoor fireplace and sample any of their 20+ wines. We split the difference between red and white here and enjoyed Von Jakob's White Chambourcin, and fun and fruity blush. We also picked up a few bottles for home and can definitely recommend Chateau Red, a real bargain at \$11. This deep, complex red bursts with flavors of black cherry and pairs wonderfully with a grilled rib eye!

### **And On The 7th Day ... We Drank Wine**

With our Amtrak departure scheduled well into the afternoon, we were able to visit the final two wineries on the Shawnee Wine Trail. Our first, Pomona Winery, is quite near one of the most well known natural attractions in the area, Little Grand Canyon.

We arrived at Pomona Winery just after noon, ready to sample some of Pomona's unique apple wines. Wine lovers often look down their nose at apple wines, but we've always been fans. The combination of tart and sweet is a delight, and we've been intrigued by the various blends and styles. Our favorite here was the Jonathan Oak Aged Reserve, kind of combination chardonnay and apple wine. You'll note the delicious apple taste along with the oakiness found in the chardonnay style, balanced with the mellowness of aging. This wine has won several Midwest wine competition medals and is one of the most unique apple wines we've ever tried.

Pomona offers nine other wines, including some interesting port style and dessert wines. All are made with fruit grown in the immediate area.

From here, it was on to Kite Hill Vineyards in Carbondale. This was our last stop as it's not far from the Amtrak station. It's a beautiful setting, with a charming bed and breakfast just waiting for you to visit. Stroll around the adjacent lake or sidle up to the expansive outdoor deck and enjoy a glass of Traminette or White Chambourcin. We took a bottle of each to go, and headed to the Amtrak station for our journey back to Chicago.

The Shawnee Hills Wine Trail is ideal for a weekend escape. You'll enjoy the abundance of nature and a blossoming array of unique wineries to tempt your taste buds. And if you don't want to drive, Amtrak takes you right to the trails front door.

We encourage you to visit southern Illinois wine country and relax in the natural splendor of the Midwest!

POSTED BY PRASAD AT 6:17 PM 0 COMMENTS

This was found posted at <http://illinoislawlemonss.blogspot.com/>