

# ILLINOIS' SHAWNEE HILLS REGION BECOMES THE STATE'S FIRST AMERICAN VITICULTURAL AREA

## *Designation Recognizes the Area's Unique Winemaking Conditions*

**CHICAGO** – Southern Illinois' Shawnee Hills region was recognized by the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau as an American Viticultural Area (AVA), becoming the state's first region acknowledged for its distinctive winemaking properties.

The designation allows winemakers to include the region's name on any wines with 85 percent or more of their volume derived from area grapes, assuring consumers that wines with Shawnee Hills on the label are enriched by the region's characteristic grape attributes. In addition, the designation will let wineries within the AVA use the term "Estate Bottled" for the first time to describe area wines produced on the same premises on which the grapes are grown.

"The AVA designation earns Shawnee Hills a place on the map along with the nation's most respected wine regions," said Ted Wichmann, founder of Owl Creek Vineyard in Cobden, who submitted the application for the designation. "More importantly, in a wine world that's becoming increasingly homogenized, the AVA stamp confirms the Shawnee Hills region's capability for producing unique wines that are distinctly Illinois."

An unglaciated ridge of land that runs 20 miles north to south, the Shawnee Hills region spans 80 miles east to west and is bordered by the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. The area earned AVA recognition due to its proven distinguishing geographic and climate characteristics that make it well-suited for grape-growing.

The region's sandstone- and limestone-based soil offers superior ground water drainage in an area that can experience excessive rainfall. Sitting 400 to 800 feet higher than neighboring areas, the region's constant summer breezes allow faster drying of the vineyards, minimizing the risk of fungal infection in an otherwise humid climate. Significantly cooler than areas to the south that can be too hot to grow quality grapes in the summer, the region is also notably warmer than areas to the north, providing a longer growing season to ripen grapes. These features combine to produce a near-perfect environment for grape varieties such as Chambourcin, Seyval, Norton and Chardonel, among others.

Some consumers view an AVA designation as a "quality tag" for wine products. Vintners hope that the naming of Shawnee Hills as an AVA will, over time, add value to the region's wines by creating a quality connotation

similar to that enjoyed by existing AVAs such as Napa Valley and Russian River Valley in California. Being named the first Illinois AVA gives Shawnee Hills the opportunity to become known as quintessential Illinois wine country, in the process helping to communicate the excellence of the Illinois wine industry as a whole.

“Illinois has a rich winemaking tradition that dates back to the 1800s, and a wine industry that’s seen exponential growth over the past decade,” said Brenda Logan, secretary/treasurer for the Illinois Grape Growers and Vintners Association. “The AVA designation spotlights Shawnee Hills’ vitality as a winemaking region – a fact many visitors have discovered already.”

The new AVA encompasses 18 wineries and 55 vineyards covering approximately 300 acres. In recent years the area’s Shawnee Hills Wine Trail has grown to become a tourist destination that entertains more than 100,000 visitors each year, generating gross annual revenues exceeding \$2 million. Comprising eight wineries set among the rolling hills and picturesque vistas of the Shawnee National Forest and dotted with charming bed and breakfasts, the trail introduces travelers to the sophisticated, genuine experiences of Illinois wine country.