

WINE COMPETITION AT THE FAIR

New push under way for an old industry

WHAT'S THE REASON? GRAPES ARE IN SEASON

Missouri was one of the top wine producers before Prohibition; some say it can happen again.

By MARTHA ZIRSCHKY
Special to The Star

After winners are announced in the first annual Missouri Wine Competition tonight at the Platte County Fair, wine aficionados will have a treat in store. Samples of the award-winning wines will be available for tasting at a fundraising event following the 8 p.m. awards ceremony.

"Our goal is to interest people in producing grapes," said Fred Whisman, chairman of the Platte County University of Missouri Extension Council, sponsor of the competition. "There is a fabulous opportunity for Platte County growers who want to explore specialty crops. As a crop, grapes will make more money per acre

than tobacco."

Whisman practices what he preaches. Four years ago he planted a one-acre vineyard in Weston. It is a test vineyard, he said, to determine the best grapes for the soil and climate in his area. His 500 grape vines include Norton, Chambourcin, St. Vincent, Chardonal and Traminette. This year, he rates Norton as his number-one variety, followed by a tie between Chambourcin and Traminette, then St. Vincent and Chardonal coming in fourth.

Only Missouri-made wines from the 56 registered state wineries were included in the inaugural competition. A Missouri wine must be by state standards made from 85 percent Missouri fruit. Anything less is labeled "American," indicating grapes from another source.

SEE WINE | PAGE 7

Scott Pirtle, right planted an eight-acre vineyard of St. Vincent grapes nine years ago. His family's Pirtle Winery in Weston, the only registered winery in Platte County, is one of 13 in the state that entered the first Platte County University of Missouri Extension Council wine competition.

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WINE: Grapes, wine products touted as state growth industry

FROM PAGE 1

The 96 different wines submitted — one to 30 depending on the winery — were judged in broad categories of red, white, pink/blush, fortified, and sparkling, with sub-groups in each category. Also judged were non-grape varieties such as blackberry, peach and pear wines, and honey mead. Mead is an alcoholic beverage of honey, water and yeast that predates cultivated grapes. It is one of the wines for which Pirtle's winery in Weston is known.

Whisman and Tom Stacey, both Platte County businessmen as well as members of the Missouri Extension Council, were pleased with the response to the wine competition.

"We didn't give them (the wineries) much notice," Stacey said. "We are pleased that 13 entered with only three weeks notice."

"It was a serious competition," said Pete Fullerton, executive director of the Platte County Economic Development Council. "It was not slapped together. It had a pretty significant panel of judges."

The panel included a restaurateur, four wine distributors, two retailers and a wine maker of national status from outside the state, Whisman said. All are sommeliers working toward master status. The results will remain secret until announced at tonight's fair ceremony, he added. Judges awarded certificates of merit, silver and gold medals, with gold medal recipients qualifying for Best in

Show. Wines not otherwise recognized received an honorable mention designation, Stacey said.

Pirtle's, Platte County's only registered winery, entered in all categories, said Scott Pirtle, a son of Elbert and Pat Pirtle. The couple founded the winery in Weston and planted the first vineyard more than 30 years ago.

Although Scott and his brother Ross, a software engineer in New York, assumed the day-to-day operation of the company last year, their parents are still active in the business. The winery currently produces 15,000 gallons of wine a year, but the goal is to quadruple that, Scott said. The Pirtles recently added a new two-story winery.

Grape growing is a science and an art — with some luck thrown in. This year, everything is "in sync" Scott Pirtle said, including soil, water and weather, what the French call *terroir* (teh-wah), loosely translated — a sense of place.

"It is the best year we have had," he said. "Wine is made on the vine."

In an interesting juxtaposition of old-country look and modernity, the Pirtles have an eight-acre vineyard adjacent to I-29. The vineyard was planted with St. Vincent grapes nine years ago, Scott said. A second Pirtle vineyard near Camden Point grows Norton grapes, Missouri's state grape. Pirtle's also buys grapes from other growers and has added another specialty crop to the I-29 vineyard, aronia

SEE WINE | PAGE 19

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THE KANSAS CITY STAR

WINE: State was once among top wine-makers

FROM PAGE 7

berries, a fruit extremely high in anti-oxidants.

Elbert, a retired UMKC mathematics professor, is a wine maker — "through trial and error and reading a lot" — as well as a wine historian.

"Wine was the first medicine," he said. Claudius Galen (13-201 A.D.), a Greek-born physician in the Roman Empire who performed the first brain surgery, treated gladiators with apple wine.

Few people realize that Missouri grapes and wine have a long and distinguished history, Pat Pirtle said. In the late 19th century, Missouri exported wine to Europe and Norton grapes from Missouri won the 1873 Vienna World Exposition.

Before Prohibition, Missouri

was second in wine production in the United States, larger than California, Scott said. However, during Prohibition, the vineyards were destroyed.

"Now Missouri wine is having a resurgence of its past glory," Elbert said.

Colleen and Jason Gerke are among those who hope to capture some of it. Moving from California three years ago, they bought acreage east of I-29 and are applying to open a winery next year.

The couple have planted four varieties of grapes, almost 3,000 vines, on five acres. The Gerkes

are currently allowed to make 200 gallons of wine for their own use, without a permit.

One acre of Norton or Traminette grapes will produce about four tons of grapes, according to Sue Berendzen of the Missouri Wine and Grape Growers. A higher yield grape, such as the St. Vincent, will produce six tons per acre. Chambourcin vines, actively managed, will yield about five to six tons.

All yields are dependent on good management, Berendzen said. Whisman estimates it takes an average of 15 pounds of grapes to produce a gallon of the juice from which wine is made.

Raising grapes is labor intensive, but the rewards are great, Scott said. Although not every grape grower also make wine, Scott said it is that moment when he tastes the new wine