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Jim Hiller's Wine Club

Michigan Wine

As we all know, Michigan's economy could use a bump –hopefully a jolt that doesn't involve the prospect of massive lay-offs and talk of a need for government bailouts. I'd suggest that an overlooked locus of economic activity developing nicely right under our noses can be found in the growth of the Michigan wine industry. Michigan's wine business is tiny in comparison to the multi-billion dollar juggernaut that is now California's, but it is encouraging to remember that California's production of dry table wines exceeded the production of cheap, sweet bulk wines only in the late 1960s. We are, in Michigan, just now at a similarly critical point in the evolution of our wine industry. For years most of the state's vineyards were planted to *vitis lambrusca* varieties like Concord and Niagara that are grown for grape juice and jelly production, but *vitis vinifera* varieties grown for wine production are a rapidly expanding portion of the current mix. We like to complain about our winters and we tend to think of wine making as a warm climate endeavor, but Michigan sits at a latitude comparable to many of the world's other great winegrowing regions.

In terms of quality and in terms of the development of distinctive styles and taste profiles, Michigan's best wines and top winemakers deserve our attention and support. Are they ready for prime time? Many are. The overall picture may be a bit uneven, but there are absolutely gems to be found, winemakers to be sought out, and stunning progress to be noted.

This edition of Jim Hiller's Wine Club presents a sampling of Michigan wines. They are not necessarily our favorites, certainly not the top selling labels that we carry at Hiller's. Rather, this is an idiosyncratic mix put together to arouse your curiosity. We hope you will find some that make you want to look further. Should that happen, we think you'll be starting a highly rewarding journey. Not only are there tasty wines to buy in the market, there are wine trails to explore and many lovely people to meet.

There are four American Viticultural Areas in the state, all located close to Lake Michigan, the moderating influence of which is the most important factor tempering our northern climate. They are: Lake Michigan Shore, Fennville, Old Mission Peninsula, and Leelanau Peninsula.

The Lake Michigan Shore AVA, located in southwest Michigan is the oldest commercial grape region of the state and home to a majority of Michigan vineyards and half of the state wine grape production. Vineyards in the region date back to 1867. The AVA's boundaries include the smaller Fennville AVA and extend as far as 45 miles inland from the lake. From the state line north to Saugatuck, and from the lakeshore east to the vineyards beyond Paw Paw, the countryside contains over 10,000 acres of grapes. Lake Michigan Shore has a warmer growing season, as much as two weeks longer than the other Michigan AVAs in Northern Michigan. Since

this region is part of the great Fruit Belt that produces most of America's grapes for juice and jelly, wine grape acreage only amounts to a small percentage of its total, though that still represents nearly half of Michigan's total wine grape production. The characteristic soil and topography of the region results from a glacial moraine, with its slopes giving vineyards increased air-drainage to the lake, reducing the danger of frost settling on vines.

Within the Lake Michigan Shore AVA is Michigan's oldest and largest winery, St. Julian, founded by Mariano Meconi in 1921 and today run by his grandson, David Braganini. St. Julian was awarded the Taster's Guild International "Winery of the Year" award in 1998 marking the only time a winery has ever received the prestigious award outside of California or France. We picked the **2005 St Julian St J Lake Michigan Shores Merlot** as a Taster's Table selection for its fruit-forward style exploding with ripe red berries, plums and spice that is soft and quaffable with a gentle complement of tannin, feeling creamy and velvety smooth on the palate. St Julian's Solera Cream Sherry is a world-class example of cream sherry and their Braganini Reserve reds are top-notch.

The Fennville AVA located in Allegan County, Michigan is entirely contained within the larger Lake Michigan Shore AVA. The Fennville AVA borders Lake Michigan on the west, the Kalamazoo River on the north, a game reserve to the east, and the Black River on the south. Recognized for its distinctive growing conditions, this lakeside area in southwestern Michigan became the state's first appellation in 1981. Fennville's designation is based on its glacial outwash sandy soils and the moderating effects of Lake

Michigan. Overall, Fennville has a relatively mild climate; during the short 160-day growing season very few days exceed 90 F. Growers have succeeded with a wide range of grape varieties, including Chardonnay, Riesling, Pinot Gris and Seyval for whites, and Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, Chancellor and Chambourcin for reds.

The Leelanau Peninsula AVA includes all of Leelanau County, which forms a peninsula between Lake Michigan on the west and Grand Traverse Bay on the east. Leelanau Peninsula is one of a series of fingerlike projections extending into Lake Michigan at Grand Traverse Bay. Nearby is the deep glacial Lake Leelanau. From a viticultural point of view, this abundance of water sufficiently moderates the appellation's climate, delaying the onset of spring until well past the frost-risk period and protecting fall temperatures from sudden plummets. Even so, vineyards in this cold, northern climate experience an average frost-free period of just 145 days. Through the winter, high snowfall prevents deep-freeze ground temperatures, minimizing winter damage to roots. The glacially deposited soils that form the Leelanau Peninsula are varied, with bedrock mainly of granite and limestone, a clay-based subsoil and topsoils of sand and gravelly loam. Though many varieties of wine grapes are grown, there is general consensus that the white varieties Riesling, Pinot Gris and Chardonnay and the reds Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc are quite well-suited to Leelanau Peninsula.

Perched on a gorgeous hilltop overlooking Lake Leelanau, Bel Lago, which means beautiful lake, was founded in 1987 and owned by Charles Edson, former professor at Michigan State University, his

professor wife, Amy Iezzoni, and her parents, Domenic and Ruth Iezzoni. The **2006 Bel Lago Leelanau Peninsula Pinot Grigio** is stainless steel fermented and sur lie aged for 6 months. It shows off a rich Italian style bouquet of fresh citrus, pear, and yeast aromas while the palate is crisp and clean with a refreshing acidity that makes it perfect with seafood. We picked also the **2007 Bel Lago Leelanau Peninsula Auxerrois** which is a lovely wine, made from Auxerrois Blanc, a rather obscure grape variety grown in the northeast Moselle and Alsace regions of France. More times than not, Pinot Blanc from Alsace contains a fraction of Auxerrois that is used to add body to the overall blend. Here it stands on its own as a 100% varietal. Sur lie aged and 20% barrel fermented, it shows aromas of crisp, green apple, honeydew melon and lemon. A lush palate of citrus and melon flavors with subtle hints of oak make for a fine pairing with grilled salmon, seafood bisque, or crab cakes.

We have also two selections from Chateau Fontaine on the Leelanau Peninsula. Getting its French title from proprietor Lucie Matthies' middle name and paying homage to the French immigrants who settled in the area, Chateau Fontaine was a deserted potato farm and cow pasture when Dan Matthies discovered the property in the 1970's with its favorable south-facing slopes for growing grapes. The **2006 Chateau Fontaine Gewurztraminer** shows exotic aromatics and tropical fruit flavors with a touch of sweetness, much like the Gewurz of Alsace, with good minerality and a firm acid backbone. **Chateau Fontaines' non-vintage Cherry wine** will make a convert of even the most adamant fruit wine-phobes (such as myself). Blended from three different cherries, it is neither too sweet or too tart with a dark cherry red color and a certain

perfumed pepper quality. Pure and clean cherry aromas and flavors show from nose to finish with absolutely nothing cloying. It's spectacular with dark chocolate.

Gill's Pier Vineyard and Winery is located in Northport, in the northern part of the Peninsula and celebrated its fourth anniversary in May of this year. The **2007 Gill's Pier Leelanau Peninsula Royce** is an off dry blend of Auxerrois, Chardonnay, and Sauvignon Blanc with a beautiful textural balance of acid, alcohol and fruitiness. It has body and length on the palate, yet remains fresh, crisp and clean. Showing a subtle frame of oak up front, it finishes with flavors of grapefruit and pear. A fine match for creamy pasta alfredo.

Also in the northern part of the peninsula is Leelanau Cellars whose tasting room is a must-stop destination for any wine-tasting road trip. Their **2007 Reserve Tall Ship Chardonnay** is rich and full-bodied with citrus and tropical fruit aromas and flavors. It has been a consistent winner for years.

Located just south of Suttons Bay in the heart of Leelanau Peninsula wine country. Blackstar Farms is an agricultural destination with an award-winning winery, distillery, tasting room, creamery and a luxurious bed and breakfast inn on a 160-acre horse farm with vineyards, orchards and wooded trails. (There is also a tasting room on the Old Mission Peninsula.) The **2006 Blackstar Farms Michigan Pinot Noir** is made from three different Pinot clones from three different vineyards, thus the Michigan appellation. It is medium-bodied with bright cherry and raspberry fruit notes in the nose framed by toasty French oak. There are hints of earth, spice, pepper and flowers around the core of ripe fruit. The **2004 Isidore's**

Choice Leelanau Peninsula Pinot Noir is another delicious Michigan pinot noir from the Leelanau Peninsula made by Lee Lutes of Black Star Farms. A bit darker in color, it too shows a subtle earthiness and a warm core of dark cherry/berry fruit. Michigan Pinot tends toward the elegance of Burgundian Pinot rather than the fruit bomb styles of some West Coast versions. As such, they are super accompaniments to game birds. Pheasant and quail in particular with their rich earthy component, will benefit from the earthy yet fruity lightness of Michigan Pinot. The nice, subtle spicy notes work well with many herbs and flavorings; anise, fennel, rosemary, mustard and mushroom infused sauces are great matches.

Our remaining Wine Club selections come from the Old Mission Peninsula, the most beautiful and arguably the best wine growing region in the state. Located in Grand Traverse County, Old Mission Peninsula is the most recently designated (approved in 1987) as well as the coolest of Michigan's four AVAs. A finger-like piece of land that juts northward from Traverse City into Grand Traverse Bay, splitting the bay into a western and an eastern arm, the peninsula is 19 miles long and just 3 miles across at its widest. Thus no vineyard is far from these surrounding waters of the Bay. Again, the "lake effect" keeps heat figures low during the height of the growing season; and prevents temperatures from dropping too far, ensuring virtually frost-free conditions during the short 145-day growing season. In this climate, suitable vine choices include cold-hardy clones of Riesling, Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer and Pinot Gris, for whites, and Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc and Merlot for reds. Old Mission Peninsula's cool conditions and slow ripening creates

wines with crisp, fresh varietal character. We'll work our way from south to north to talk of the rest of our Club selections.

Before one gets to the peninsula itself, one can visit the tasting room of Left Foot Charlie in Traverse City. The brainchild of Jen and Bryan Ulbrich, LFC is found in The Village, formerly the Northern Michigan Asylum, one of the most extensive historical restoration projects in America. There Ulbrich makes wines strictly from Old Mission grapes. Although the west coast has many wineries that out-source all their fruit, LFC may be the only one in Michigan that does so. Their focus is on Riesling, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Grigio, and Gewurztraminer because those grapes thrive in Northern Michigan and Ulbrich believes that they exemplify why Northern Michigan is a world-class wine-growing region. His success is proving his point. LFC's wines sell out almost immediately. We managed to secure for the Club a skosh of **2007 Left Foot Charlie Old Mission Peninsula Murrur**, a blend of Riesling, Pinot Grigio, and Traminette that is quite delicious and some **2007 Left Foot Charlie Old Mission Peninsula Red Drive**, a classic Bordeaux blend of Cabernet Franc, Merlot, and Cabernet Sauvignon with the addition of one barrel of a deep red variety called Regant to make a great Michigan version of an iconic blend. "It aged in barrels for 10 months and has this familiarity of fruit, soft tannins, and a length in the finish that will bring back good red wine memories," says Ulbrich.

Located just north of Traverse City at the base of the Old Mission Peninsula, Black Star Farms Old Mission occupies what was a cherry processing facility. The **2006 Blackstar Farms Arcturos Old Mission Peninsula Sur Lie**

Chardonnay sees no oak in its fermentation or ageing revealing its fruit and mineral components unadorned. Its flinty and steely aromas make the wine reminiscent of a crisp Chablis or Macon. It is medium-bodied with ripe pear, apple, and citrus aroma with a hint of floral notes combined with its distinct minerality. This is a particularly food friendly wine that will stand up to the cheese, garlic and anchovies of a Caesar salad and at the same time its fruit driven character won't steal the show from a delicately seasoned cream based soup.

Peninsula Cellars, located in a former one-room schoolhouse, is the next tasting room you'll see on Old Mission. Bryan Ulbrich was the winemaker who put Peninsula Cellars on the map, getting national attention for his crisp-tart Rieslings, Pinot Blancs and Gewurztraminers. In fact, Peninsula Cellars' '02 Semi-dry Riesling won the 2003 World Riesling Cup, and also took Best White Wine at both the International Eastern Wine Competition and the San Francisco International Wine Competition. Now making wines for Left Foot Charlie, Ulbrich's influence at Peninsula remains strong, as his sister has taken over the primary winemaking duties. The **2005 Peninsula Cellars Old Mission Peninsula Cabernet Franc** shows a nose of black cherry, ripe plum and currant, with light toast and chocolate aromas, ending in a long complex finish. The **2006 Peninsula Cellars Old Mission Peninsula Detention** is a blend of Baco noir, Lemberger, and Cabernet Franc. It's an off-dry mixed berry bombshell that pairs well with most dishes, and is easy to enjoy. The tannins are very soft, supported by a subtle wood character from brief barrel aging. Many of the state's wineries produce red wines that are perhaps aimed at those who don't generally like red wines. Detention is

a well-made example of the type – a wine for Beaujolais drinkers – not sweet, just easy to drink.

Next up the road comes Chateau Grand Traverse, the first winery to open on Old Mission in 1974. Best known for its Rieslings, the Chateau also makes two outstanding dry white blends: Ship of Fools and the Alsace-style Edelzwicker. **2007 Chateau Grand Traverse Old Mission Peninsula Whole Cluster Riesling** is made in a classic crisp and aromatic style. Produced from specially hand-picked grape clusters pressed whole without any destemming or crushing, its fermentation was long and cool, tapering off at just under 2% residual sugar. The resulting wine is sleek and minerally with nuances of grapefruit, apple and pear. The **2002 Chateau Grand Traverse Old Mission Peninsula Proprietor's Blend** is a medium-bodied dry red blend of Merlot, Pinot Meunier, Gamay Noir, and Pinot Noir. Aged for 30 months in small oak barrels, the wine shows flavors of cherry and plum combined with earthy undertones and just a hint of oak flavor. Very light in color, it has yet a full, rich bouquet and a lovely elegance.

Six of our selections hail from one winery, Brys (rhymes with "wise") Estates, which opened in May 2005. After early retirement from a career in real estate development, Eileen and Walter Brys decided to fulfill their dream of owning a winery. The Michigan natives considered vineyard land all over America before ultimately investing in Michigan's Old Mission Peninsula. Their wines became an instant success and have been continuously in very high demand. Their **2007 Pinot Noir/Riesling** is a lovely pale ruby color with raspberry/strawberry fruit in the nose and pear/apple flavors on the palate. The zippy

acidity makes it an effortless food pairing and a delightful aperitif on its own. The **2007 Pinot Grigio** has the full body and lush mouth feel of an Alsatian Pinot Gris while keeping the crisp clean bouquet and finish of a Collio Pinot Grigio. The **2007 Dry Riesling** is a classic of the type: beautiful minerality, razor sharp acidity, defined flavors and aromas of stone fruit and citrus. The **06 Signature Red** and the **06 Signature White** are masterful blends that truly show that Michigan wines have the potential to compete on any stage, as does the **06 Merlot**. Coenraad Stassen, the very talented winemaker at Brys who grew up in South Africa, is scheduled to soon release the first Chenin Blanc from Michigan. Brys Estate's success with that grape will likely be a bellwether for the future.

Our final two selections are sentimental favorites. The non-vintage **Bowers Harbor "Otis"** has been their best seller for years and is a testament to Otis the Golden Retriever, who was the official greeter at BHV, a job has since taken over by Cooper, a Bernese Mountain dog with his own eponymous label. I'm still partial to Otis, however. His wine is a Chardonnay/ Riesling blend with a nice floral nose and soft fruit flavors. Very apropos.

Chateau Chantal is one of the most beautiful spots you'll ever visit. Perched at the tip of Old Mission Peninsula, it has a luxury inn and winery with the best views of any vineyard up north. Look in one direction to see a beautiful view of the West Grand Traverse Bay; turn to see an equally stunning view of the East Bay. The **Naughty Red** is one of a pair of blended reds, its sweet twin being Nice Red. Naughty is the drier of the two and is a very pleasant quaffable light red that is a fine match for fish, lighter meats, or mild cheeses.