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DINING

Ohio wine industry hopes Buckeye pride can wipe out 'inferior' image



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At farm-to-table restaurants across Ohio, menus proudly detail their in-state sources for beef and chicken, eggs and produce, cheese, honey, and even the wood used in wood-fired grills.

From corner bars to swanky rooftop lounges, they boast about the number of Ohio craft beers on tap and the locally distilled spirits poured into cocktails.

But once you open a wine list at any of those places — or just about anywhere in the state, really — your choices no longer hit so close to home. And if you ask the average Ohioan about wines carrying that same made-in-Ohio label they seek out on other products, you're as likely to get a roll of the eyes as any expression of home-state pride.

Even though Ohio winemakers produced more than 6 million bottles in 2024, Ohioans just don't show the same kind of love for their state's wines as they do other Ohio-made products. Those inside the state's \$6.6 billion-a-year wine industry acknowledge the image problem, but they say they're trying to change the narrative about Ohio wines.

"You almost have to talk people into liking Ohio wine, even if they like it. You almost have to give them permission," said Jeff Lohr, wine manager for House

Wine in Worthington, which sells and serves Ohio wines along with those from France, Italy, California's Napa Valley and other more highly regarded regions.

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Generations-old perceptions of Ohio wines as overly sweet "and not very good" create barriers in building their brand, a consumer study conducted in early 2025 for the Ohio Department of Agriculture concluded.

"There's a historical bias that the Midwest can't grow premium grapes and therefore produces inferior wine," said the report, updated every five years for the department's Ohio Grape Industries Committee. "Retailers and restaurants skip Ohio wines because they think no one wants them. But consumers don't try them because they don't see them on enough shelves or menus. It's a loop — low visibility reinforces low demand."

The findings and conclusions will be used to guide new efforts, funded through excise taxes collected on all wine sold in the state, to sell today's consumers on an industry that's as old as Ohio itself.

Wine in Ohio: 'A taste more divine'

Before Ohio began making cars and tires, before it produced presidents and astronauts and championship football teams, the state was known for wine.

Cincinnati's Nicholas Longworth, who history remembers as a father of American winemaking, started planting American Catawba grapes near the Ohio River during the early 1800s. A sparkling wine he accidentally created in 1842 became so popular across the country and world that it inspired a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

*Very good in its way
Is the Verzenay,
Or the Sillery soft and creamy;
But Catawba wine
Has a taste more divine,
More dulcet, delicious, and dreamy.*

It also made Ohio the nation's leading wine producer by the end of the 1850s, with more than 3,000 acres of vineyards along just 50 miles of the Ohio River stretching eastward from Cincinnati. Despite wetter, colder conditions that make grapes more prone to disease and destruction here, the wine industry thrived in southwestern Ohio and later in the northeast part of the state along Lake Erie.

When wine country moved west

Today, according to the Ohio Department of Agriculture, there are 1,400 acres across the entire state dedicated to growing grapes. For context, [Ohio has about 13.5 million acres of farmland](#).

What happened to Ohio's wine industry?

"The only thing that crushed the momentum of the eastern United States in terms of wine production was Prohibition," said Maria Smith, viticulture program manager at Ohio State University's campus in Wooster. "That's when it all moved out to California, because it was kind of like the Wild West out there. Who's going to be monitoring rural California from Washington, D.C.?"

From the time the 18th Amendment took effect in January 1920 until it was repealed in December 1933, the production and sale of alcoholic beverages was outlawed nationwide. Prohibition wiped out Ohio's wine industry, as farmers began selling their grapes for juice or jelly or earning their living through other crops.

'One of the great wines of Ohio,' ice wine becomes state's sweet spot

Wine-making never fully recovered. Even though 432 wineries are licensed in the state today, they bring in two-thirds of their juice from elsewhere. ("Ohio wine" is defined as wine produced in Ohio, whether or not a winery's grapes are grown here.)

"Had it not been for Prohibition, I think Ohio ... would have remained like America's wine country," Lohr said. "The snobbery of California might not have

ever really kicked in in the same way. Prohibition ended the whole thing, because so many of the vineyards just never came back."

The old knock on Ohio wines

Back when Ohio wines ruled the American market, tastes were different and Ohio-grown grapes fit them perfectly. People preferred sweeter wines, the kind produced by Longworth's Catawbas and their cousins, the Concord and Niagara.

"Nobody thought there was anything wrong with that," said Gregory Stokes, a chef and sommelier who owns the Downtown wine shop, Accent, and the Bottle Shop in the University District. "Not even the Europeans necessarily thought so."

But sometime around the 1960s or '70s, Stokes said, dry wines — Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and others fermented until little sugar is left — became more fashionable. Would-be wine aficionados followed en masse.

"There's always been a little bit of a chip on the shoulder in the American psyche that they don't want to look less sophisticated than their European brethren," he said. "Americans who are just getting into wine are so afraid to get it wrong and look like the rube."

David Kusz, a Columbus sommelier whose business, MySomm, hosts wine classes and tastings, said sweet wines are looked down upon by some in his field as gateway wines that people move past as their palates mature.

"The perception is if I'm a real wine drinker that I don't drink sweet wine," he said.

The reality, Kusz and other local wine experts said, is people should drink what they like.

Ohio's wine industry today

Another reality: While the folks Lohr calls "snob-meliers" look down on sweet wines, surveys and sales data show they remain popular. Despite — or perhaps

because of — the reputation for producing a sweet product, Ohio's wine industry is still the nation's seventh largest.

But the state's wine list is more diverse than it gets credit for, said OSU's Smith, who tests new grape varieties and advises growers on what can thrive in Ohio's sometimes-difficult climate. Ohio vineyards now grow more European-American hybrids and produce a number of dry wines such as Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon Blanc.

"A lot of people think Ohio equals concord, and that probably hasn't been the case in 10 to 20 years," she said. "There's an immense amount of diversity that can and should be celebrated and appreciated in Ohio. We are a huge industry, and there's something for everyone."

The industry has grown, too, in the 45 years since state legislators created the Ohio Grape Industries Committee to support growers and promote their products. In 1981, there were 35 wineries in the state. Today, there are 432.

"Ohioans think about cornfields, soybean fields," said Brian Baldrige, director of the Ohio Department of Agriculture. "The true story is this is one of those segments that is so vital to our industry in Ohio. It is significant. Those numbers are strong."

Barry and Jennifer Rhonemus started Rhonemus Cellars outside Lancaster in 2020 and started growing grapes in 2021 along a section of the Valley View Golf Club. They bottled their first estate wines — those made from grapes grown on their own property — in 2024.

Rhonemus Cellars now includes a restaurant and plans to build cabins to accommodate tourists who have become an important part of Ohio's wine industry. Keeping up with other changes in their adopted field, Rhonemus Cellars makes what Barry Rhonemus calls a "bone-dry" Pinot Grigio, as well as a Cabernet Franc and Dry Riesling produced from grapes the winery grows in New York.

"We want to have a nice portfolio that profiles whatever tastes our guests like to enjoy," he said.

Wineries also offer more than just wine to bring in customers. Tours, tasting rooms and on-site restaurants draw visitors to wineries across the state, especially around the Lake Erie shores and islands, Lake and Ashtabula counties, and the area around Canton and Akron.

In Columbus, a full calendar of events — yoga classes, painting parties, live music and more — draws customers to Wyandotte Winery on the Northeast Side. The oldest winery in the city was built in 1976 on a residential street off Cherry Bottom Road, and its setting inside a home built by its founders is suited for bridal showers, live music and crafts classes.

Co-owner Alena Miller said Wyandotte's relaxed atmosphere and a wine list that ranges from dry Cabernet Franc to sweet plum reinforces its message to customers to drink what they like.

"We tend to have that kind of following of people who like to just come, buy a bottle wine, sit and listen to the music," she said.

How will Ohio wines be marketed?

In a drink-what-you-like world, Ohio industry officials plan to emphasize the diversity of Ohio wines that has eluded modern consumers.

They also plan to introduce people to an Ohio wine industry that seems to have eluded many.

"They think there are seven or 10 wineries (in the state)," said Christy Eckstein, executive director of the Ohio Grape Industries Committee. "It's not a negative perception so much as it's awareness. That is an easier hurdle to overcome."

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Already, the committee publishes slick guides that map out every winery and vineyard in the state. There's also a website (findohiowines.ohio.gov) and an Ohio Wines app that provide information on events, deals on wine and food, and discussions about wines and wineries.

But the most difficult part of the task will be changing entrenched industrywide standards in how wine is sold and consumed. Baldrige said he'd like to see producers experiment with smaller, lower-priced bottles to make wine less of a special-occasion drink. Consumers in the state survey complained that retailers' wine sections and restaurants' wine lists are poorly organized with little to no guidance on what wines to choose.

Distribution channels also must change if the industry hopes to reintroduce Ohioans to Ohio wines.

Although the industry report said restaurants and wine shops "skip" wines made in their own state, it also acknowledged that wineries often skip those opportunities to sell their products. Distribution takes time and effort that small wineries can't spare, Smith said, and selling wholesale lops about 30% off the price wineries make if they sell directly to consumers.

There has been progress, though. Ohio's state parks now sell Ohio wines exclusively. Giant Eagle supermarkets in northeast Ohio carry a large selection. The All American Quarter Horse Congress, an annual event that draws 500,000 visitors to Columbus, featured Ohio wines during its monthlong run in October.

Eckstein said she hopes a little Ohio pride will help the effort, too.

"You're going to see us tying in with 'homegrown,' 'authentic' and 'exceptional' for Ohio wines," she said. "Because there is a pride, right? Ohio can make world-class wines."

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