

# Fall colors form a backdrop for wine, beer and spirits sampling in Southern Illinois and Indiana



Susan Spagnuolo operates one of the few woman-owned distilleries in the United States. Her Bear Wallow Distillery is in Gnaw Bone, Ind., in Brown County. ( *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier* )

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Updated  
9/12/2021 7:56 AM

Pair wine tasting with leaf-peeping for an enjoyable autumn road trip through Southern Illinois and Southern Indiana, and consider tossing in a few breweries, distilleries and festivals along the way. Time your visit for mid- to late October when fall colors usually peak. Remember, though, Mother Nature can be fickle.

### **Head for the Shawnee Hills**

The first wine trail and first AVA (American Viticultural Area) in Illinois formed in 1995 when three wineries south of Carbondale, Illinois, formed the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail. Now with 11 wineries, the trail winds through 40 miles of hilly Shawnee National Forest blazing red and gold in autumn.



**Grape vines flank the tasting room at Alto Vineyards outside Alto Pass, Ill., the oldest winery on the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail. -**  
Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Each winery has singular characteristics. The oldest, Alto Vineyards, displays the work of local artisans and has a second tasting room in Champaign, Illinois. Pomona Winery operates from a building the owners constructed themselves from repurposed lumber. Instead of grapes, it uses other fruits to make its wines. Kites hang from the ceiling of the tasting room at Kite Hill Vineyards.

Modeled after a 400-year-old Tuscan villa, Blue Sky Vineyard's tasting room has 20-foot ceilings with hand-hewn beams. Two bed-and-breakfast suites are upstairs. Five suites take the names of wines at Von Jakob Vineyard, which also brews beer on site, and Starview Vineyards has a four-bedroom home it rents through Airbnb. Both Von Jakob and Starview Vineyards serve lunch.

Wine country visitors might want to detour for dinner at 17th Street Barbecue in Murphysboro, Illinois. It has won numerous awards, including ribbons from the Memphis in May World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest.



**Server Tori Gill shows off a rack of ribs at 17th Street Barbecue in Murphysboro, Ill. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier**

You can sample food as well as wine on the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail during Wine and Food Pairing Weekends the first weekends in August and November. If it's beer you want, head to Riverside Park in Murphysboro Oct. 9 for the annual Big Muddy Monster Brew Fest that draws 2,500 people for tastings of more than 200 craft beers. Tours and tastings are offered on weekends all year in Murphysboro at Big Muddy Brewing, the first production brewery to open south of Chicago since Prohibition.

Tour companies Shawnee Shuttle ([shawneeshuttle.com](http://shawneeshuttle.com) (<https://shawneeshuttle.com/>)), Winery Tours of Southern Illinois ([winerytourssil.com](http://winerytourssil.com) (<https://winerytourssil.com/>)), Xtreme Limo ([xtremelimobus.com](http://xtremelimobus.com) (<https://www.xtremelimobus.com/>)) and Wrightway Transportation ([wrightwaytransportation.com](http://wrightwaytransportation.com)

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### **Take a hike**

Skyline drive between Cobden and Alto Pass, Illinois, offers fine views of fall colors, but visitors who want a bit of exercise will find plenty of hiking trails for leaf-peeping. An easy half-mile walk leads to Pomona Natural Bridge, a 90-foot sandstone span tucked into the Shawnee National Forest. The forest also surrounds Giant City State Park where tree-lined trails wind through rock formations caused by eons of geological faulting and folding.

The Shawnee is part of one of the largest stands of old-growth hickory forest in the U.S. extending east into Hoosier National Forest in Southern Indiana. One of the most popular trails on the Indiana side, Hemlock Cliffs, leads into a sandstone canyon shaded by a canopy of trees showing off their autumn hues.



**Trail markers point the way along Hemlock Cliffs, a popular hiking trail in the Hoosier National Forest in Southern Indiana. Fall visitors combine leaf peeping with tastings on the Indiana Uplands Wine Trail.** - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Farther north, Brown County State Park has 18 miles of forested hiking trails meandering through Indiana's largest state park. A climb up a 90-foot fire tower is rewarded with panoramic views of hills dressed in red, orange and gold.

### **Tasting along the uplands**

The Hoosier National Forest surrounds much of the Indiana Uplands Wine Trail. Shaped like the letter "L," it winds through the countryside around Bloomington, Indiana, slices south to Interstate 64 and east before meandering along the Indiana side of the Ohio River. A recognized AVA since 2013, it includes nine wineries.



**Owen Valley Winery near Spencer, Ind., is known for its persimmon wines.** - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

At the Owen Valley Winery, three miles outside Spencer, Indiana, you can order small bites with your wine. Four wines use Indiana-grown persimmons, but its best-seller, Crimson & Cream, blends Catawba, Niagara and Steuben grapes.

You can get a meal at Drift Coastal Italian inside French Lick Winery in West Baden Springs, Indiana. Sample sparkling, dry, sweet and fortified wines and buy by the glass or bottle in its tasting room. The winery will celebrate its 25th anniversary, a year late due to COVID-19, on Sunday, Sept. 12, with live music, hors d'oeuvres, and new wines for tasting and purchase.

The winery building also encompasses Spirits of French Lick distillery where you can sample white spirits: vodka, white bourbon, absinthe, aquavit and brandy. The distillery offers tours by appointment.

Driving need not be an issue for guests of the historic West Baden Springs Hotel, a 15-minute walk from the winery. A trolley connects the hotel to sister property French Lick Springs Hotel.

In Brown County, several wineries lie within a short distance of lodgings in Nashville, Indiana. Salt Creek Winery offers classic wines as well as 100% fruit wines, including crowd-pleasers riesling and Catawba. Country Heritage Winery, based in La Otto, Indiana, acquired Chateau Thomas Winery as its Brown County tasting room and has kept the Chateau's popular Abe Martin jug wines. Cedar Creek Winery, established in Martinsville, Indiana, has been operating a tasting room in Nashville since 2013 with a variety of wines, including some found nowhere else. Brown County Winery operates a tasting room in downtown Nashville as well as at its winery a few miles outside of town where favorites include Vista Red and Old Barrel Port aged in bourbon barrels.

### **Other ways to imbibe**

Not a wine drinker? No problem. Brown County is flush with opportunities to enjoy beer and spirits.

In nearby Gnaw Bone, Indiana, you can enjoy samples and tour Bear Wallow Distillery, one of the few women-owned distilleries in the U.S. and the first "legal" still in Brown County. Big sellers at Bear Wallow include Gnaw Bone Bourbon and Hoosier Hooch Flavored Moonshine, chief ingredient in its popular moonshine shake-up cocktails.

Hard Truth Distilling Company launched in 2015 and now ranks as the state's largest craft distillery. Order a cocktail and stick around for a meal at the on-site restaurant.



Beer lovers find year-round flagship beers as well as seasonal favorites such as pumpkin beer at QuaffON! Brewing Company. A popular choice, Busted Knuckle porter takes its name from a brewer's mishap on the job. Tours of the production facility are given on the third Saturday of the month. Be sure to keep your hands to yourself.

Along with numerous fall markets and pumpkins patches, Brown County has several fall festivals worth planning a trip around. The AABC Late Summer Art Exhibit, showcasing the work of local artists, began in July and runs until Oct. 27 at the Brown County Playhouse. The Bean Blossom Bluegrass & Uncle Pen Festival takes over the historic Bill Monroe Music Park Sept. 17-25. Throughout October, visitors can see artists at work during the Back Roads of Brown County Studio Tour, a self-guided driving tour highlighting the arts and crafts of Brown County, nicknamed "Arts Colony of the Midwest."

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### **If You Go**

- [southernmostillinois.com/](https://southernmostillinois.com/) (<https://southernmostillinois.com/>), (800) 248-4373
- [shawneewinetrail.com/](https://www.shawneewinetrail.com/) (<https://www.shawneewinetrail.com/>)
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- Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by Visit Indiana and Southernmost Illinois Tourism.