

TRAVEL

Fall for wine
in Galena

Fiery foliage, wine tours and events all reasons to head to northwest Illinois in autumn

BY KATHERINE RODECHTER

GALENA, Ill. — The world's largest wine region would be where, do you think?

If you guessed Bordeaux in France, or Australia's Barossa Valley, or even California's Napa Valley, you're off by thousands of miles.

Last July, a federal ruling designated a new U.S. wine appellation, and you can be in the thick of it just a three-hour drive from Chicago.

The Upper Mississippi Valley wine region, which starts in Galena, Ill., covers 13,914 square miles in four states along the mighty Mississippi. That makes it the largest American viticulture area, and the largest by pollution in the world, in terms of land mass.

Active wine production was the mainstay of the vineyards in northwest Illinois, east to Iowa, southwest to Wisconsin and southeast to Missouri, and small, family-run wineries exist covering just about 100 acres. You can sample wine in their cozy tasting rooms and peek at the production line. Some even let you stomp their grapes after the fall harvest, if you don't mind getting your feet wet and purple.

The Upper Mississippi Valley wine region lies in the Midwest's so-called driftless area untouched by the last advance of the ice glaciers. Unlike the surrounding region flattened by the immense sheets of

GALENA CONTINUED FROM PAGE 29A

Despite name, Iowa Wine Tours focuses tasting trips on Illinois vineyards

ice, the landscape is marked by deeply carved river valleys, hills and bluffs where a patchwork of farms, fields and leafy groves spreads below. When Jack Frost colors the foliage in the fall, the contrast of greens, golds and reds makes for dramatic viewing.

Fall also brings the first wine release of the season and novice wine tasting, along with wine and food pairings, and tours combining leaf looking with apple picking and wine-tasting.

While you certainly can tour the wineries on your own, drivers need to watch their consumption to stay within the law. Finding the wineries tucked away on country roads can be a challenge to anyone unfamiliar with the area.

"The signage sometimes isn't that great," said Dennis Dieters, owner of Iowa Wine Tours.

In spite of its name, Iowa Wine Tours does 99 percent of its business in the Galena area, Dieters said. He picks up vacationers — the vast majority from the Chicago area — at their lodgings in a van or motor coach. Most groups number from two to 12 people on the five tours he offers daily, though he also offers custom tours and can accommodate larger groups or requests. His most popular is the Vanny Vanuech's Wine Tour, lasts about four hours, which visits three wineries and costs \$60 including tasting fees, transportation and an all-you-can-eat lunch served family-style at Vinty Vanuech's Italian restaurant in downtown Galena.

A native of Dubuque, Iowa, just across the Mississippi from Galena, Dieters used to work for Galena Trolley Tours. He started his business three years ago and runs tours to 16 wineries in the region, clustering them to keep driving time to a minimum.

"I try to do them so they are no more than 20 minutes to half an hour apart," he said.

Dieters said he's amazed by the growing popularity of wine tasting and the number of vineyards that have sprouted in the region in the past 10 years.

"I was a beer drinker," he said. "Ten years ago I never thought I'd be doing wine tours."



Massbach Ridge Winery near Elizabeth, Ill., produces wine primarily from grapes grown in Jo Daviess County. | PHOTO COURTESY GALENA/JO DAVIESS CVB



Massbach Ridge winemaker Peggy Harmston pours for customers in the tasting room. | KATHERINE RODESHNER FOR THE SUN-TIMES

The Upper Mississippi Valley still has a long way to go to promote itself, he added. "People don't see this area as a big wine region, so we need to educate them."

One of the newest wineries in the area, Rocky Waters Winery, opened last year near the hamlet of Hanover, Ill. Jared and Phyllis Spahn bought 112 acres after he left his computer systems job in Peoria. "When we decided to build a house, my wife said I'm not going to live with the smell of cows," Jared said. Instead of raising cattle, they began growing grapes in 1998 to sell to local wineries.

When the Spahns decided to build their own winery, a grandson named it for the rocky streams where the grandchildren play on the property. The names of wines produced there also come from physical

features on the land: Log Cabin White, Cottonwood Bush and Pear Tree Bush, which picks up the fruit flavor of a 60-year-old pear tree in the midst of the vineyard. An annual grape-stomping festival takes its name from a popular episode in the old TV sitcom "I Love Lucy."

The new winery, with its tasting room and shop, sits on a bluff with a panoramic view of the vineyard and valley. The Spahns and their two dogs, Rocky, a 130-pound Leonberger, and Razzie, a labradoodle, moved their living quarters to the winery complex. They live in their former log home, which sleeps 10 and has its own stocked lake.

Massbach Ridge Winery opened in 2008 near a former German settlement outside Elizabeth, Ill. Owners Peggy Harmston, a winemaker, and her husband, a doctor, produce about 2,000 cases a year, corking one bottle at a time.

"We get my mom and a neighbor to help and it's a simple assembly line and a lot of fun," Harmston said.

The 15 wines offered in the tasting room range from dry reds to semi-dry and semi-sweet whites to dessert wines, and they're made from several varieties of grapes, including Marechal Foch, Concord, Niagara and Traminette.

A triathlete and avid hunter, Harmston is often so hard to chat in the tasting room. Ask her about the time she bagged a black bear in northern Ontario.

The oldest winery in the Galena area is also the second-largest producer in Illinois after Lynfred Winery in Rockelle. Galena Cellars

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE: Galena is about a three-hour drive (164 miles) from Chicago via I-90 to Rockford, then U.S. Route 20 to Galena. People living west or south of Chicago might save some time by taking I-88 west and I-39 north to Rockford before picking up Route 20.

GALENA INFO: Lodging, dining and attraction information can be found at the Galena/Jo Daviess County Convention & Visitors Bureau. (877) 464-2536, galena.org.

IOWA WINE TOURS: Offers four wine tours and one brewery tour, ranging from three to five hours, \$50 to \$60; (563) 582-4076, iowawinetoursinc.com

WINERIES: Most charge about \$3 to sample five or six wines and waive the tasting fee if you purchase a few bottles.

◆ Rocky Waters vineyard/Winery, Inc., (815) 591-9706, rockywaterwinery.com

◆ Massbach Ridge Winery, (815) 291-6700, massbachridge.com

◆ Galena Cellars vineyard and Winery, (800) 397-9463, galenacellars.com

was founded in the early 1970s by Robert and Joyce Lawlor. The family business now spans three generations with Christine Lawlor-White as winemaker.

Though it produces about 25,000 cases of wine annually, its vineyard covers just four acres. It buys grapes grown near and far. Its 40-plus wines are made from French hybrid and Riesling varieties, Illinois grown St. Croix and Frontenac grapes, rhubarb and fruit, such as peaches, blueberries, blackberries, Door County cherries and Wisconsin apples and cranberries.

Galena Cellars operates tasting rooms on Main Street in Galena and at the vineyard in the Galena countryside, where a two-bedroom, four-bath house and a one-bedroom suite above the tasting room are available for rent. A third tasting room and gift shop is located in Geneva, Ill.

Katherine Rodesher is a weekly based free-lance writer.