

Sip the Life Fantastic



Fall colors in Illinois and Indiana set the scene for events and for sampling wine, beer, and spirits.

BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Pairing wine tasting with leaf-peeping is a perfect recipe for the ideal autumn road trip through southernmost Illinois and southern Indiana, especially when you toss in a few breweries and festivals along the way. Time your visit for mid- to late-October when fall colors usually peak, although Mother Nature can be fickle.

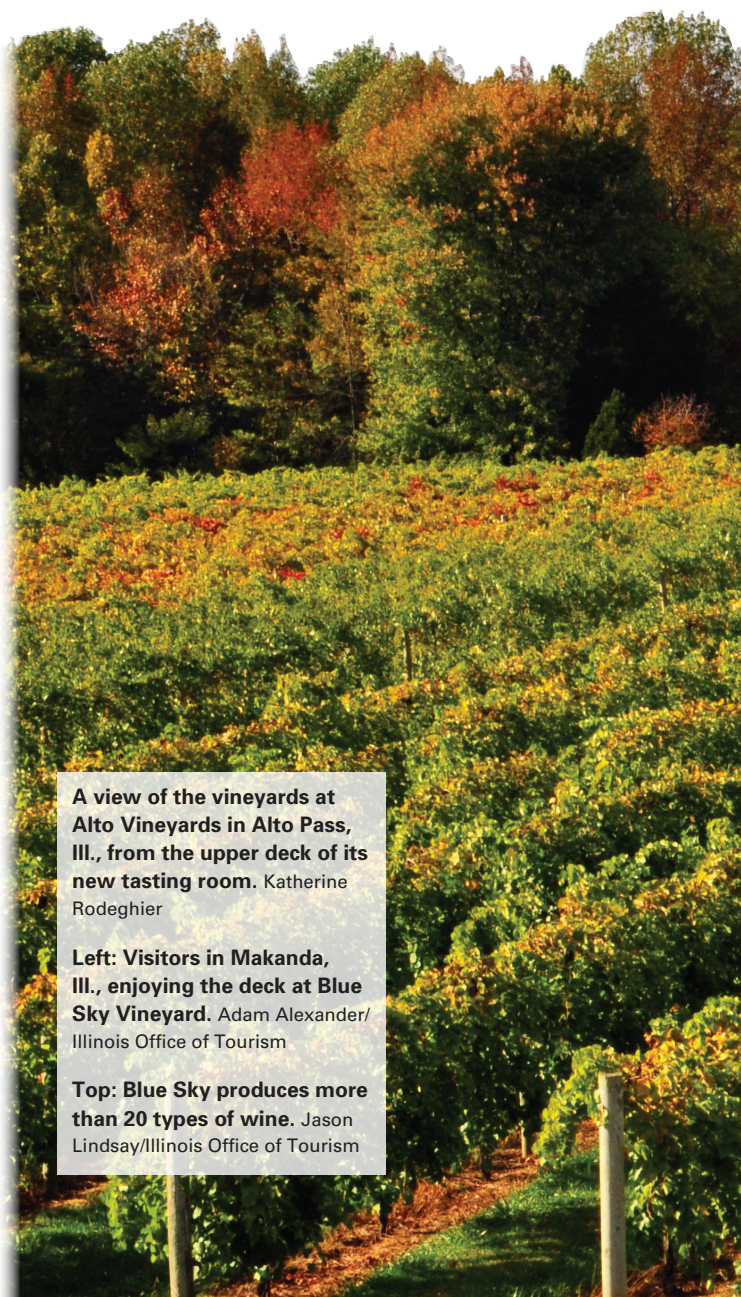
Put safety first by designating a driver before setting off to sample or take advantage of local tours and shuttle or ride-share services.

HEAD FOR THE SHAWNEE HILLS

Three southernmost Illinois wineries formed the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail in 1995. The state's first American Viticultural Area (AVA) followed in 2006. Now with 11 wineries, the trail winds through 40 miles of hilly Shawnee National Forest that blazes red and gold in autumn.

Each winery has singular characteristics. The oldest, Alto Vineyards, opened a larger tasting room last year with more room to display the work of local artisans. It's one of the few wineries allowing dog owners to bring their pets inside. Pomona Winery offers tastings in a building the owners constructed from repurposed lumber. Instead of grapes, Pomona uses other fruits like apples and black currants, to make its wines.

Modeled after a Tuscan villa, Blue Sky Vineyard's tasting room



A view of the vineyards at Alto Vineyards in Alto Pass, Ill., from the upper deck of its new tasting room. Katherine Rodeghier

Left: Visitors in Makanda, Ill., enjoying the deck at Blue Sky Vineyard. Adam Alexander/Illinois Office of Tourism

Top: Blue Sky produces more than 20 types of wine. Jason Lindsay/Illinois Office of Tourism



has high ceilings with hand-hewn beams. Two bed-and-breakfast suites are upstairs. Kites hang from the ceiling of the tasting room at Kite Hill Vineyards. A deck overlooks a pond and house with two guest rooms available to travelers.

Five suites take the names of wines at Von Jakob Vineyard, which also brews beer on site. Von Jakob serves dinner in its pub on Friday and Saturday nights. Both Von Jakob and Starview Vineyards are open for lunch daily.

Time your trip to coincide with a Wine and Food Pairing Weekend on the first weekend in November.

Wine country visitors might want to detour for dinner at two popular dining spots. The 17th Street Barbecue in Murphysboro has won numerous awards, including ribbons from the Memphis in May World Championship Barbecue Cooking Contest. Smell the smoke during Praise the Lard, Murphysboro's Barbecue Cookoff, Sept. 20–22.

Barbecue and Cajun fare lure diners onto the back roads outside Cobden, Ill., to the rustic roadhouse Blue Boar Restaurant & Bar.

Beer lovers, the region has something for you, too. Check out the annual Big Muddy Monster Brew Fest in Murphysboro on Oct. 13 that will feature dozens of craft brews. From select spots in town, you can take a free shuttle to the event in Riverside Park.

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. Its autumn specialty beers, Oktoberfest and Pumpkin Smasher, will join other favorites on tap during its Oktoberfest on Sept. 28. Listen to oompah music while feasting on German and Czech dishes, some made from family recipes.

The Trails



ILLINOIS

Shawnee Hills Wine Trail

11 wineries

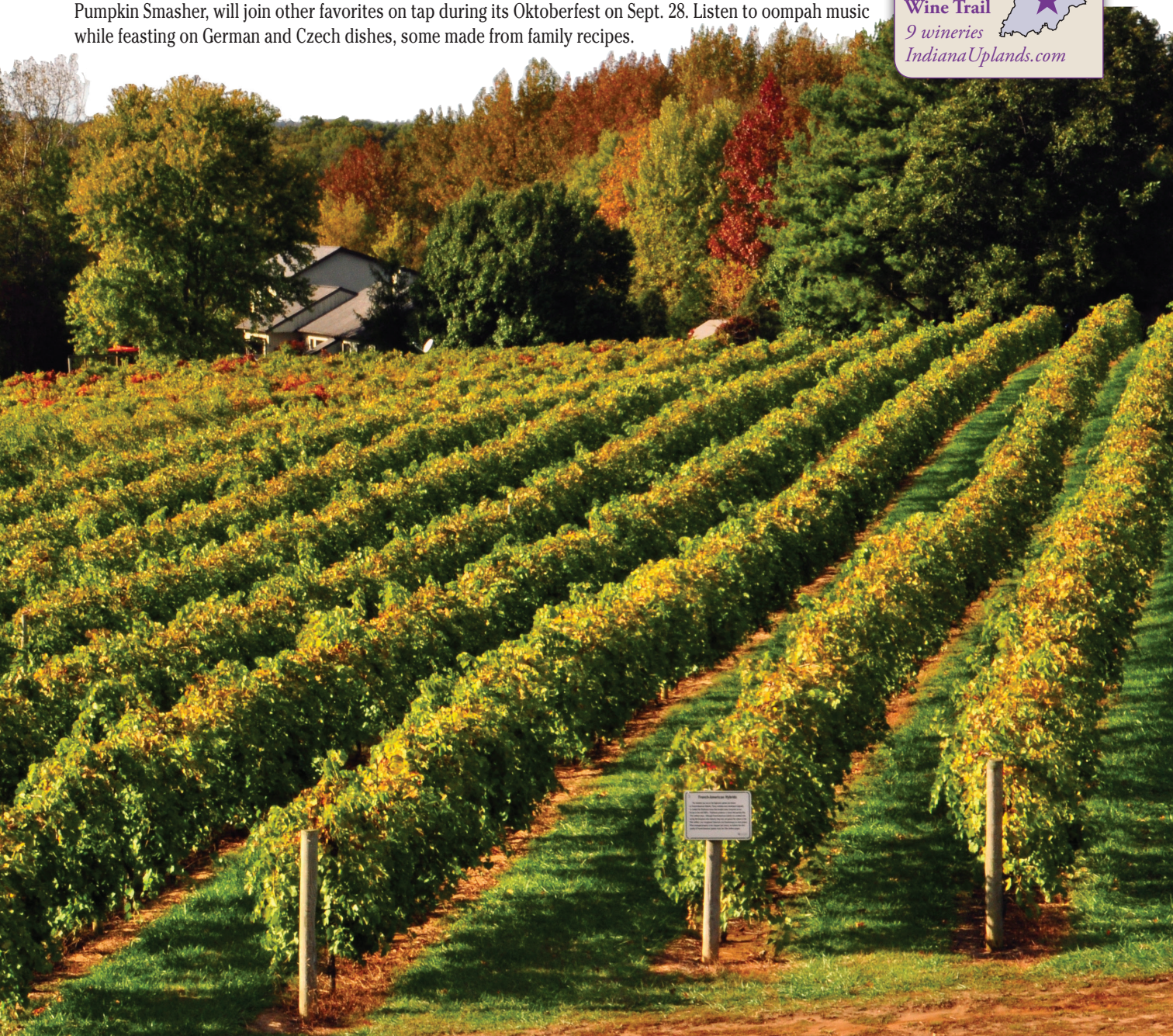
shawneewinetrail.com

INDIANA

Indiana Uplands Wine Trail

9 wineries

IndianaUplands.com



Tour companies such as Shawnee Shuttle, Winery Tours of Southern Illinois, and SI Tours organize wine- and beer-tasting trips for groups lacking a designated driver.

TAKE A HIKE

Skyline Drive between Cobden and Alto Pass in southernmost Illinois offers fine views of fall colors, but visitors who want a bit of exercise will find plenty of hiking trails in the region. At Shawnee National Forest, there's a half-mile hike that leads to Pomona Natural Bridge, a 90-foot sandstone span. 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. that stretches 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.

Farther north, Brown County State Park in Nashville, Ind., 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. A recognized AVA since 2013, Uplands Wine Trail includes nine wineries. Located in south-central Indiana, the trail encompasses more than 100 miles, north from Spencer to New Albany near the Kentucky border.

The Owen Valley Winery operates a tasting room in the restored Tivoli Theatre in Spencer. In its winery 3 miles outside of town, you can order small bites to accompany your wine tasting. On the first Saturday of every October, it puts on a Harvest Moon Festival showcasing the products of Indiana vendors and the arts and crafts of local artisans.

Dine at The Vintage Café inside French Lick Winery in West Baden Springs. Sample a variety of wines in its tasting room. The winery also offers samples of white spirits — vodka, white bourbon, absinthe, aquavit, and brandy — from Spirits of French Lick distillery that offers reservations-only tours on Saturdays. For fall, the distillery is rolling out two award-winning bourbons.

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

Indiana's Brown County is home to several wineries within



Above: Wine lovers on the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail can take a break from tastings to hike among the boulders at Giant City State Park.



Right: Susan Spagnuolo operates Bear Wallow Distillery in Gnaw Bone, Ind., one of the few women-owned distilleries in the United States. Katherine Rodeghier photos

walking distance of lodgings in Nashville. The Brown County Convention & Visitors Bureau makes sampling safe and easy with its Sippin' Trip bus tours. One of the stops is Gnaw Bone, home to Brown County Winery, as well as Bear Wallow Distillery, where you can sample moonshine and bourbon. Bear Wallow, one of the few women-owned distilleries in the U.S., also offers a Farm-to-Fifth tour.

Along with numerous fall markets and pumpkin patches, Brown County has several fall festivals worth planning a trip around. Art Colony Weekend, Sept. 7–9, includes the Great Outdoor Art Contest. The 44th Annual Bill Monroe Hall of Fame & Uncle Pen Days Festival, Sept. 19–22, features bluegrass music at Bill Monroe Music Park.

Throughout the month of October, visitors see artists at work during the Back Roads of Brown County Studio Tour, a self-guided driving tour showcasing the arts and crafts of Brown County, nicknamed “Art Colony of the Midwest.”

Enjoy the fall colors and bounty of flavors of southern Illinois and southern Indiana. ●

Katherine Rodeghier is a contributor from Western Springs, Ill.



Fall colors brighten Indiana's Brown County State Park.
Katherine Rodeghier

BEFORE YOU GO

For more information, contact:

- Southernmost Illinois Tourism Bureau, (800) 248-4373 or southernmostillinois.com
- Brown County Convention & Visitors Bureau, (800) 753-3255 or browncounty.com
- Shawnee Hills Wine Trail, shawneewinetrail.com
- Indiana Uplands Wine Trail, indianauplands.com

To visit southernmost Illinois or southern Indiana, first stop by your nearest AAA service office for maps, lodging reservations, and TourBook® guides. A list of offices to serve you is on page 6 in this issue. Visit AAA.com/travel for a TripTik® Travel Planner.