

Foodie Travel USA



Sip Southern Illinois

Fall colors form a backdrop for wine sampling in the Shawnee Hills.

Story and photos by Katherine Rodeghier

The main highway leads to a blacktop country road that narrows as it winds for miles through forests and farmland. Just when you think your GPS must be wrong and you're lost in the middle of nowhere a sign points to a nearly hidden driveway. Suddenly a stuccoed Tuscan villa, glowing gold in the afternoon sun, appears before row upon row of grape vines.

A mirage here in the backwoods of Southern Illinois?

Nope, it's Blue Sky Vineyard, one of 11 wineries on the [Shawnee Hills Wine Trail](#).

For those who don't know this neck of the woods, happening upon a slice of Italy in the "Land of Lincoln" might seem as surprising as learning Illinois' first designated AVA (American Viticultural Area) has been turning out award-winning wines for more than 20 years. Vineyards along the state's oldest wine trail have earned hundreds of national and international medals since the trail began in 1995.



Photo Credit Katherine Rodeghier

Why vineyards in Southern Illinois? As with any wine region, it's all about the *terroir*: soil, climate, topography. The Shawnee Hills Wine Trail winds for 40 miles through the 270,000-acre Shawnee National Forest wedged between the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. Gently sloping hills, part of the foothills of the Ozark Mountains, are topped with rich loess soil deposited by receding Ice Age glaciers. Limestone bedrock adds calcium to the soil good for grapes. Mild winters and long summers with sun to warm the vines angled down hillsides make for optimal growing conditions.

Autumn is an optimum time to visit the area, as leaves blaze red and gold along highways and hiking trails.

The oldest winery on the trail, [Alto Vineyards](#), was founded by Guy Renzaglia after he retired from Southern Illinois University. The first release in 1988 sold out in three days. The next year the winery won its first medals in international competition and helped put Chambourcin—a dry, full-bodied red—on wine lovers' radar. A second and third generation stepped up as Alto Vineyards racked up more than 500 national and international awards. A larger tasting room was opened in 2016 with more space to display the work of local artisans for rotating art shows. The winery is also pet-friendly, so feel free to bring Fido inside. A second location with tasting room and retail shop operates farther north near the campus of the University of Illinois.



Photo Credit Katherine Rodeghier

Most vintners on the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail grow hybrids, crosses between native varieties and vinifera grapes such as Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Cabernet Sauvignon. [Kite Hill Vineyards](#) was an apple orchard when the first owners bought it. Upon first seeing the land, the wife of the owner chided her husband asking just what he planned to do on such a windy hill. His quick reply: Fly a kite. Kites hang from the ceiling of the tasting room where a deck overlooks a pond and vineyards. Chardonnay, a vinifera hybrid, and Chambourcin, a French hybrid, grow alongside other varieties. One of Kite Hill's Chambourcins won a gold medal at the Indianapolis International and state competitions. With rich, structured tannins, it displays aromas of blackberry jam, ripe plum, and herbal spices.

[Von Jakob](#) averages 20 styles of wine at a time for tastings ranging from dry, complex reds to sweet and fruity dessert wines. It became the first winery in Illinois to produce a White Oak Port. It also brews beer on site and serves daily lunches as well as dinners in its Grill & Pub on Fridays and Saturdays.



Photo Credit Katherine Rodeghier

The kitchen stays open every day for lunch in the café at [Starview Vineyards](#). One of the owners, Brett Morrison, says the Shawnee Hills reminds him of the Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania where he and his wife, Regina, lived before moving to Southern Illinois in 2013. Both became active in the local wine industry and Brett has twice been named Viticulturist of the Year by the Illinois Grape Growers & Vintners Alliance.

All the wineries on the trail offer tastings ranging from free to \$6 and most schedule live entertainment on weekends, especially during October, usually the peak of fall colors and the busiest time on the trail—make note if you hope to combine a wine tasting with an event. Wine and Food Pairing weekends, sort of a progressive tasting of wine and food samples, are held in March, August and November. The next is November 2 and 3, 2019. A Holiday Open House after Thanksgiving, November 29 and 30, 2019, combines shopping, music, appetizers and, of course, wine.

The Shawnee Hills encompasses one of the largest stands of old hickory forests in the United States. Visitors drive through the thick of it on the winding, hilly road leading to [Pomona Winery](#) with a tasting room in a building the owners constructed themselves from repurposed lumber. Instead of grapes, Pomona uses other fruits to make its wines. Kir, a best-selling aperitif inspired by the French bar drink, blends apples and black currants. Blueberries and strawberries transform into dessert wines while

several varieties of apples become semi-dry and semi-sweet wines. One standout: Jonathan Oak Aged Reserve, a crisp, clean wine made from Jonathan apples and aged in French oak. The tasting room shows off multiple award ribbons and medals for prizes in the non-grape category, including the Illinois State Fair Governor's Cup, Indy International, and the Mid-America Wine Competition.

[Blue Sky Vineyard](#) is no slouch in the award department, earning all of these awards plus prizes in the San Francisco Chronicle wine competition and the Jefferson Cup Invitational. Its Cabernet Franc, a double gold winner, has a rich aroma of black currant and plum. Along with wine and other beverages, it offers a menu of soups, sandwiches, pizza, appetizers and desserts.

Blue Sky's building, modeled after a 400-year-old Tuscan villa, has 20-foot ceilings with hand-hewn beams, Portuguese tiles, intricately carved doors and a large indoor seating area. Outdoor terraces overlook the vineyards and hilly countryside. After a few glasses of wine and a meal on a chilly autumn evening it's comforting to snuggle up in two suites upstairs and dream of Southern Illinois—or Italy.

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Kite Hill, one of four wineries on the trail with overnight accommodations, has two guest rooms in a house a short walk from the tasting room. Two century-old houses down the road from Von Jakob Vineyard's tasting room contain five suites that can be booked individually or as a whole house.



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