

# WINES & WINES

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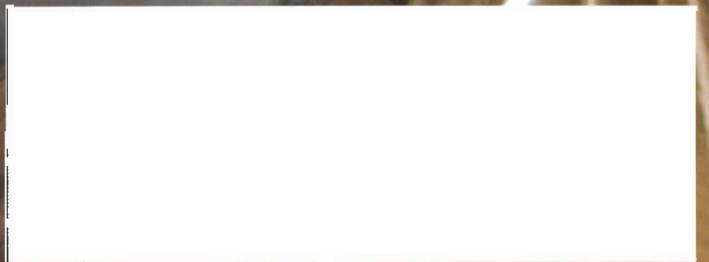
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# L. Mawby Bets On Michigan Sparkling Wine

Cari Noga

In a country where most people drink bubbly only on New Year's Eve, focusing on sparkling wine as an exclusive wine-making niche might seem rather risky. But for Larry Mawby, proprietor of Michigan's L. Mawby vineyard and winery, it has brought focus, critical acclaim and a singular identity to the Leelanau County producer. It is, in

fact, the only wine Mawby produces—and has been since 2003.

"I think you should do one thing and do it well," he said.

He didn't always feel that way. Like other Michigan winemakers who helped launch the state's industry in the 1970s, Mawby started out making a little bit of everything, trying to figure out what would grow in northern Michigan, and what would sell.

At the time of Mawby's first crush in 1978, sparkling wines made in the traditional, bottle-fermented method constituted just 15% of his production. But Mawby soon discovered that the region's cooler climate was ideal for producing sparkling wines, and resulted in physiologically mature grapes with low sugar and high acidity. Now all he had to do was convince consumers that sparkling wine belongs at the weekday dinner table.

"I wanted to convey to people that wine is a mealtime beverage," Mawby said. "I think sparkling wine is the most versatile (wine) of all."

Meanwhile, new wineries were opening their doors on the Leelanau Peninsula and neighboring Old Mission Peninsula. By the mid-'90s there were more than a dozen. Tourists who drove the industry in its infancy found that they could no longer visit every winery in the area during a long weekend. As the local winery count edged its way



## HIGHLIGHTS

- Although Michigan winemaker Larry Mawby started out making a full range, he now restricts his production to sparkling wine.
- Mawby feels that wine is a mealtime beverage, and that sparkling wines are the most versatile.
- Some of Mawby's bubbly are made from wines he buys in bulk from California.
- Although he has distributors only in Chicago, San Francisco and New York, Mawby's facility is already running at capacity.

up toward today's total of 20, Mawby realized that establishing himself as a sparkling-wine-only producer would not only allow him to focus, it would be a way to stand out in the crowd.

"There are so many wineries, it's a way to differentiate," Mawby said.

He started to phase out table wines in the late '90s, and wholesaled his last still wine in 2000. His tasting room served its last glass of still wine in 2002, and since 2003, it's been all bubbly for Mawby, who believes he is the largest producer of sparkling wines in the Midwest.

In a sense, Mawby's entire career in agriculture has been preparing him for this intense specialization and concentration. Though his formal viticulture and enology training is limited to a certificate earned at a three-day course at UC Davis back in 1976, Mawby gained plenty of experience on his family's farms, which were spread out over several hundred miles in Michigan and included dozens of fruits and vegetables. At one point, Mawby said, the family's farm market carried 35 different fruits and vegetables, including 120 varieties of apples.

Mawby managed the family farms for 13 years, all the while growing grapes and teaching himself winemaking on the side. After his father's death in 1986 he began selling and leasing some of the other farms, winnowing down his obligations to focus on wine.

His focus on winemaking has now pushed even grapegrowing to the back burner. Of his 10 wines, two are estate grown, and two others contain some estate grapes. All the rest contain purchased wines—most from California—that Mawby blends and re-ferments.

The move to nonestate grapes wasn't planned, however. "The real impetus was the 2003 winter freeze," Mawby said. About 80% of the crop was lost.

"I was in this growth phase where I was trying to make more wine, not less," he said. He contacted a sparkling wine producer in California, thinking he could buy grapes and send them to press. The winery instead offered to sell him its excess wine.

Mawby saw an opportunity. Buying

wine from a single source rather than grapes from multiple growers would ensure quality control. It also saved the cost and effort of buying and transporting grapes.

There was, however, the significant issue of preserving the integrity of his brand, L. Mawby, which he'd built as an estate-bottled label. Mawby's solution was to start an entirely new brand—M. Lawrence—of tank-fermented sparkling wines made from the California wine.

"My response to a crop failure was to expand," Mawby said.

The less-expensive M. Lawrence line also opened up a new customer front. His bottle-fermented L. Mawby wines—all of which are made with Leelanau County fruit, if not his own—retail between \$18 and \$27 per bottle. The M. Lawrence line sells for \$12-14 per bottle, with one wine available only in the tasting room priced at \$10 per bottle.

### *"My response to a crop failure was to expand."*

—Larry Mawby

The response has been amazing. In its two years of existence, the M. Lawrence line went from zero to between 55% and 60% of Mawby's sales.

Mawby achieves all this with very limited distribution. Outside of Michigan he has distributors only in Chicago, San Francisco and New York. The latter only serves Long Island and part of Manhattan, however. Las Vegas—home to wedding chapels and celebration-minded vacationers and gamblers—is a "logical" future market, but Mawby said his facility is running at capacity now. "I'm not looking real hard at new markets. I want to do a better job at the ones I'm in," he said.

In 2005, Mawby sold just over 3,000 cases of both his bottle-fermented and tank-fermented brands. This year he'll produce about 4,000 cases of each from the 2005 harvest. He also does custom production of sparkling wines for eight different wineries.

He'd like to narrow his repertoire still further, from 10 wines—"way too many"—to two or three. But in a business that's deeply personal, that's tough to achieve. Historically, between 75% and 80% of Mawby's sales have been out of the tasting room. That's changing with the introduction of M. Lawrence. In 2005, only 57% of sales were out of the tasting room. Still, that's a lot of face-to-face transactions, and Mawby hasn't forgotten the faces of customers who weren't so enthusiastic about his switch to exclusively sparkling wines. "For several years, I had customers who were deeply disappointed that their favorite wines were no longer being produced," he said.

In addition, Mawby is an ambassador for his product, striving to change the perception of sparkling wines as a drink to be kept corked until a special occasion. Every summer he hosts a series of catered picnics at his winery. Menus and wine selections are carefully coordinated, and feature dining commentary from Michigan's "fizz-master extraordinaire," as Mawby was dubbed by British wine writer Tom Stevenson in his Wine Report 2005.

By the end of the summer, some 500 people will have heard his pitch personally. Most of the guests will come with a friend who's already been converted. That's Mawby's favorite way to earn a customer.

"The very best introduction to your wine is when a friend recommends to a friend," Mawby said.

A little publicity from a nationally known wine critic doesn't hurt, either. Earlier this year, *Washington Times* columnist Paul Lukacs brought national attention to Mawby's Talismon sparkling wine by featuring it as one of only two sparklers in his book, *The Great Wines of America: The Top Forty Vintners, Vineyards, and Vintages*. ■

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