

## Crop Production

# Promotion reaches across vineyards

By **CARI NOGA**

**F**OLLOWING the example of California's Napa Valley and upstate New York's Finger Lakes, Michigan wineries have joined forces to create a marketing identity built on agritourism and adding value.

By doing so — which has meant overcoming independent and competitive tendencies — they've increased demand for Michigan winegrapes and set an example that other Michigan growers could follow.

"You can't work together on everything, and the diversity of our industry is a strength," says Linda Jones, executive

### Key Points

- Cooperative marketing has boosted Michigan wineries sales.
- Success has led to a need for more winegrape acreage.
- Michigan's wine industry could set a marketing example for other growers.

director of the Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council, which has fostered the development of four regional wine trails through state grant dollars awarded the past three years. "But there are situations where it's best to work together, cooperatively."

## Others partner to develop niches

**G**ROWERS of other Michigan commodities can look to the wine industry for lessons on how to attract consumers and add value to their crops.

The apple industry is very eager to piggyback, says Linda Jones of the Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council. Some producers of traditional apple cider are now meeting to try to become commercial producers of hard cider, which is fermented into an alcoholic beverage. A winemaker's license is required.

Two northern Michigan dairy producers turned their milk into value-added enterprises. Shetler's Dairy in Kalkaska County started a creamery and bottling operation 10 years ago, delivering directly to northern Michigan grocery stores.

At Moomer's Ice Cream west of Traverse City, patrons can watch cows grazing while they sit on a deck that overlooks the field next door. Those cows don't actually provide milk for the ice cream; it would be cost-prohibitive. But they do provide a unique setting that helps sell ice cream.

Given that three of four trails — the Wineries of Old Mission Peninsula and the Leelanau Peninsula Vintners Association in the northwest and the Southwest Michigan Wine Trail — already exist in established vacation destinations, focusing on agritourism made the most sense.

"The marketing focus ... is pretty much limited to trying to attract visitors to winery tasting rooms," says Larry Mawby of L. Mawby, a member of the Leelanau group, which hosts four annual events at the 11-member wineries. More than 700 attended November's "Toast the Season" event.

Between 2002 and 2004, Jones' group awarded \$55,000 to the four trail groups, grant dollars they then matched and used to create Web sites, brochures and maps of the trails and to support events. The Leelanau group also got a \$30,000 USDA grant in 2002, which it matched and used for marketing programming.

"We really want to enhance the Leelanau Peninsula as a destination for people interested in wine," says Charlie Edson, who wrote the federal grant and runs Bel Lago Vineyard and Winery.

### It's working

"As far as I'm aware, everybody's sales are up," Edson says.

Mawby says he's seen "phenomenal

increases in sales" over the past five years. "It's not anything we're doing. It's because of all the wineries around us. I'm absolutely convinced of it," he says.

But do more people in tasting rooms benefit grape growers? As growers themselves, the winery owners say yes.

"We're trying to market the wineries to increase the growth of the vineyards," says Liz Berger, operations manager at Chateau Chantal, one of four members of the Old Mission group.

Berger says that appellation, the geographic area where the grapes are grown, adds value to the wine. Leelanau Peninsula, Old Mission Peninsula and the Lake Michigan Shoreline are all appellations. To claim an appellation on a label, a wine must contain a certain percentage of grapes grown in that area.

"Our consumer is very concerned, as they get more savvy, about where the grapes are actually coming from. And, it's something we're very proud of and want to emphasize," Berger says.

In fact, Jones says the interest in Michigan wine means demand for grapes exceeds supply.

"Our sales are growing faster than our vineyards," she adds. "We've got to think about ways to get apple producers and cherry producers to consider putting in a few acres of winegrapes."