

Indiana winemaker experiments with recipes

UNIONVILLE, Ind. (AP) — Out along a quiet country road by the northern shore of Lake Lemon, past Needmore and Trevlac and about 30 minutes from Bloomington, sits Possum Trot Winery.

Ben Sparks and his wife, Lee, have sold wine from here since 1978, 10 years after he retired from the Navy. A taste for expensive wine and a need to economize led the 68-year-old Sparks to his current occupation.

"The idea I had was to grow grapes that would produce the wine I had been accustomed to drinking before I retired," he says. "I got deep into viticulture and enology and decided to become a commercial operation."

It's not exactly on the scale of California's Napa Valley, but south-central Indiana does have a strong wine-making industry.

There are about 11 wineries, 12 vineyards in Indiana, including four wineries in and around Bloomington.

The number of Hoosier producers does not include those in southern Michigan, which associate more closely with the wine industry in northern Indiana.

The state's grape and wine industry is often overlooked as part of Indiana agriculture, says Jim Butler, president of the Indiana Winegrower's Guild.

"Indiana has not put any money into the wine industry and we have been working to get funding for a grape marketing program similar to what the state of Ohio has," says Butler, who operates the Bloomington Winery.

Open daily between March and December and by appointment the rest of the year, Possum Trot creates about six wines a year beginning in mid- to late August.

Among the 8,000 to 10,000 bottles produced annually are usually one or two dry whites, a dry red and what Sparks calls "wines for the Pepsi Cola crowd . . . sweet wines with no flavor — not very sophisticated wines."

The winery, named for a nearby creek and road, attracted about 1,000 visitors last year, according to its guest book, which includes names from Australia and nearly every state in America.

Only about half of the visitors sign the register, Sparks says, but nearly every entry contains effusive thanks for the hospitality and the wine.

Sparks initially planted about 4,000 grape vines on 60 acres of land, at first producing "experimental wines" like rhubarb and red and white wines for the personal consumption.

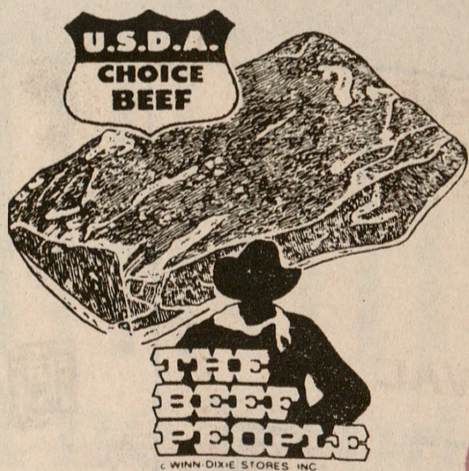
But the grape vines were a failure. The climate was too cold for the

vines and the crop was destroyed, Sparks says. The winery now buys grapes from growers in more temperate areas of the state such as Evansville, Terre Haute and the Ohio Valley region.

The art of winemaking is a self-taught skill for Sparks, who attends courses around the Midwest. He is a member of several professional associations on viticulture, the science of grape-growing, and enology, the study of wine and winemaking.

Like other wineries, Possum Trot has surprised many visitors, among them a Massachusetts couple who wrote in the guest register: "What a delight to find a vineyard in Indiana."

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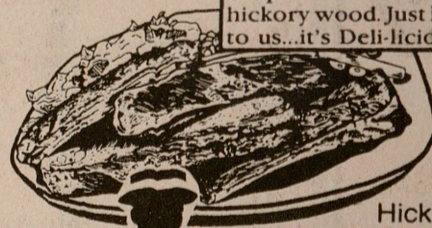


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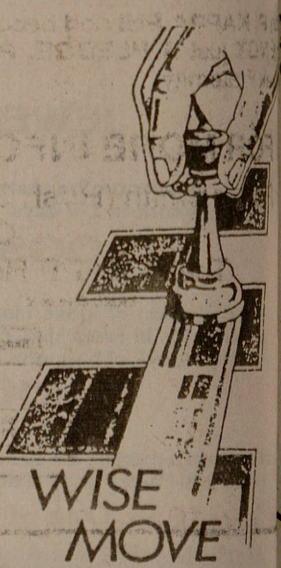
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