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[Wine-Hunting In Beer Country](#)

A sipping trip through Door County, a hub of Wisconsin's newly resurgent wine industry.

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The flat land of Wisconsin opens up into small, gently rolling hills as I approach the Door County peninsula. I'm headed to a conference for women journalists, but I have only one thing on my mind: wine.

Specifically, cherry wine, which Door County is known for, along with cherries, Honeycrisp apples and fish boils.

The area also is known as the Midwest's answer to Cape Cod, another long peninsula surrounded by two bodies of water. Here, it's Green Bay instead of Cape Cod Bay and Lake Michigan rather than the Atlantic Ocean, but the effect is the same. The water moderates the fluctuation in temperature, giving the land a more moderate climate than it might otherwise have.

Like Cape Cod, Door County's big business is tourism. Its towns are dotted with seafood restaurants, art galleries, fudge shops and ice cream parlors. Egg Harbor, population 250, is home to the Cape Cod Motel – its name hammering home the resemblance.

In truth, I am surprised how much the landscape reminds me of Cape Cod as I follow the two-lane highway

up the peninsula. The maples and oaks are turning red and gold just as in New England. But here, the trees are used to mark boundaries between farms, and the fields are filled with cows rather than sea grasses and wildflowers.

As I approach the peninsula's largest town, Sturgeon Bay, the signs become progressively cuter. Planes fly into Cherryland Airport. Cars drive along Tart Cherry Lane. This is the Midwest at its best: well-kept, quaint and (at least the weekend I am here) uncrowded.

I grew up in the Midwest, and I'm tempted to feel nostalgic, but this is nothing like the blue-collar, economically troubled Detroit suburb where I spent my youth. Workers here tend to orchards, not assembly lines.

The orchards provide the fruit that winemakers use to produce cherry and other vintages. This delights me because I am into wine with a passion I reserve for a handful of things. That's because wine is one of the few things in life that can be perpetually new.

A Pinot Grigio grape and its juice will taste different depending on where it was grown, the sun and rain that season, and when it was picked. If you give two winemakers juice from grapes grown in the same fields, their wines will still taste different because each will use a slightly different process to produce a vintage that suits his or her taste.

Thus, a Pinot Grigio from one winery will be completely different from that made by another, and a bottle produced by one winery this season may be very different from that made next year. Each time you drink a wine, you know that particular taste, a blend of all those factors, may not have existed before and may never exist again.

Of course, I didn't always have this kind of appreciation for wine.

The Midwest I knew growing up was a working-class land of keg parties and pig roasts. Beer was the drink of adults. My mother drank bitter chardonnay kept for months in jugs in our refrigerator, but then she was always a little unconventional. I think friends might have put it down to her being from Delaware.

I started liking wine while living in California. I'd walk into a grocery store and hundreds of bottles with dozens of beautiful labels would beckon. I learned that trying different ones could be an experience — not always a pleasant one, but that was part of the fun: You never knew what you would get.

Then, suddenly, after a decade and a half of living on the coasts, I was transferred back to the Midwest for work. My friends warned that I would have to change my drinking habits. I was moving to Milwaukee, home to Miller Brewing Co. For more than 100 years, the city provided the nation with brews such as Blatz, Pabst, Schlitz and, of course, Old Milwaukee.

Beer is, in my mind, almost the opposite of wine. It's mostly made in big factories with a recipe developed for consistency. Sure, there's the microbrewery movement, but frankly, most of the people in my town drink Miller Lite.

Shortly after I arrived, however, I got a pleasant surprise: Wisconsin has a booming wine industry.

It's part of a national trend that seems to have two sources. First, and perhaps most important, the "eat local" movement has expanded to include alcohol. People who enjoy eating locally grown produce and

buying bread from their corner bakery want to wash it down with something that hasn't been shipped thousands of miles from California or Australia.

Second, there are culinary tourists — like me. When we travel, we want to try food that is grown, prepared and eaten in that specific area. Rightly or wrongly, we feel like it provides a more authentic travel experience. Plus, we're sick of chain restaurants.

Many of the wineries popping up across the country are also reclaiming a heritage nearly lost with Prohibition. States such as Oklahoma once had a decent wine industry, but in many cases, it took nearly three-quarters of a century for the vineyards to reopen after the 18th Amendment was repealed.

Wisconsin has one of the oldest vineyard sites in the nation at Wollersheim Winery near Madison. Hungarian Count Agoston Haraszthy planted his first American vineyard there in the 1840s before moving west to become the father of California's wine industry. When Robert and JoAnn Wollersheim reopened a vineyard and winery there in 1972, they helped kick off the rebirth of Wisconsin's wine industry.

Fruit wines are popular here because the state has many thriving orchards, while vineyards have often struggled with grapes sensitive to the Upper Midwest's harsh winters. The vineyards that have survived are lucky if they can produce 20 percent of the fruit they need and import the rest from grape-growing states such as California and Washington. But cherry wine is a natural in Door County, where dozens of cherry growers are clustered within less than 500 square miles.

There's plenty to love about Door County's wineries. Here are some tips if you go.

[Red Oak Winery and Vineyard](#), 325 N. Third Ave., Sturgeon Bay, 920-743-7729. Tasting room hours vary by season. Tastings cost \$4, including crackers, cheese and chocolate. Recommended: Ruby Cherry Port, \$20. Also try: Door County Cherry Beaujolais, \$14.

[Simon Creek Vineyard & Winery](#), 5896 Bocek Road, Sturgeon Bay, 920-746-9307. The winery is open from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily from Nov. 1 to May 14 and from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. from May 15 to Oct. 31. Free tastings and tours. Recommended: Untouchable Red, \$14.50. Also try: Door County Cherry Wine, \$11.

[Lautenbach's Orchard Country Winery & Market](#), 9197 Highway 42, Fish Creek, 920-868-3479. Winery tours at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. May through October cost \$3. Tastings are free. The market and tasting room is open from 9 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. daily. On Saturdays, it stays open an extra hour, closing at 6 p.m. Recommended: Blackberry Blend, \$8.95. Also try: Celebrate!, which blends white grapes with Door County cherries and apples, \$8.95.

[Door Peninsula Winery](#), 5806 Highway 42, Sturgeon Bay, 1-800-551-5049. Tours cost \$2 and run every 45 minutes from 9:30 a.m. to 4:15 p.m. Tastings are free, and the tasting room is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Recommended: Signature Series White Merlot, \$12.99. Also try: Blackberry Merlot, \$9.99.

I decide to start my winery tour at Red Oak Vineyard if only because it's two blocks from my hotel. This turns out to be a good thing because the pours at Red Oak are substantial, and after trying half a dozen wines, one might not want to drive far, or really, drive at all.

The winery had three cherry wines on its tasting menu. I tried them all.

The first was a sweet cherry wine, which I found disappointing. The taste was so light, I could barely tell it

was cherry and not some other kind of rose´.

But then things picked up. I had been chatting with Judy, the woman who was handling tastings that day, and she recommended a cherry Beaujolais that she called her “Thanksgiving wine.” She had moved to Door County a number of years before, and after her husband died, she attended a Thanksgiving dinner with several other widows, singles and transplants. She took a bottle of the cherry Beaujolais, everyone loved it, and they’ve not had a Thanksgiving without it since.

After that, I tried a cherry port that was the best thing I drank all weekend. Port is wine fortified with brandy. It has a higher alcohol content, about 18 percent compared to a wine’s 12 to 13 percent. Like the Beaujolais, the port tasted of cherry, but it also had a creaminess the wine lacked. I envisioned ice cream, milk shakes and hot chocolate.

I left Red Oak feeling very appreciative of Door County wines. In addition to the cherry wines, I tried a Gewurztraminer and several others I liked. The winery itself was cozy with a granite bar, dim lighting and leather-covered stools. I had spent a happy afternoon sipping wine, snacking on crackers and cheese and chatting about the area.

The next two wineries I visited could not have been more different. Lautenbach’s Orchard Country Winery & Market and Door Peninsula Winery specialize in fruit wines that appeal to the masses of tourists crawling over the peninsula in the summer and early fall.

I drove north to Lautenbach’s in Fish Creek with the idea that I would work my way back south to Sturgeon Bay. As I drove north along Highway 42 on the peninsula’s eastern side, many of the farm stands were already crowded with people buying Honeycrisp apples, cider, donuts and baked goods.

Lautenbach’s looked more like a crowded country market than a winery. Families and couples cuddled up to the bar to try a sample or two before plucking their selection from a rack, grabbing a donut or jar of jam and whisking out the door.

From there, I went to Door Peninsula Winery, the oldest and best-known in the county. Bus tours from the Chicago area and elsewhere in Wisconsin stop here, and a charter bus was parked outside when I pulled up. Inside, couples, friends and in-laws hovered over the bar. Bottles were stacked on their sides in crates that lined the walls, and visitors pulled them out with an enthusiasm that reminded me of bees swooping into a honeycomb.

I felt as if I had landed in Disneyland-for-adults . The display area was packed with wine racks, bottle openers and other wine-related paraphernalia. The winery offered dozens of vintages, including several for Christmas and Halloween. Many seemed geared to novice drinkers with cute names like Razzle Dazzle Raspberry.

About this time, I realized that I don’t actually like sweet fruit wines anymore. While I had adored them in my days as a baby drinker, I now found them syrupy and cloying rather than refreshing.

I beat a quick exit and dashed over to nearby Simon Creek Vineyards. The creek was dry the day I visited, but I did see grapes growing on some of the vineyard’s 120 acres. On the back patio, a musician played as couples who had finished tasting and tours lingered over glasses of wine and snacks they may have picked up from one of the area’s farm markets.

With owner Tim Lawrie pouring, I tried several wines and was most impressed by Simon Creeks' cherry wine and one called Untouchable Red. (Most Wisconsin wineries have small staffs, and if you go when it's not too busy, you can almost always meet the owner or wine maker.)

Untouchable Red is Simon Creek's top seller. Most people want to drink red wine because it has supposed health effects. But they don't like the dryness, which can seem sour or bitter to novice drinkers. Simon Creek, like a couple other wineries in Wisconsin, developed a slightly sweet red that appeals to Midwesterners' palettes while still allowing them to bask in the glow of drinking something that could reduce their risk of heart disease.

As I drove home, I reflected the Door County was, as one of my friends would say, good for my heart. One incident stuck in my mind, making it clear to me how much I have changed since moving back to the Midwest.

While I was at Red Oak, a couple came in and the man walked up to the bar and announced he was about to meet an aunt and uncle he had not seen in years. He wanted a wine to take to lunch to celebrate.

"Something about \$40," he said.

I nearly laughed out loud. I knew immediately that he was from New York. The belief that quality — of a person or a thing — was demonstrated by its income or price had become oppressive to me when I lived outside the city.

Judy recommended the most expensive bottle she had, a \$32 port. The New Yorker bought it without trying it — or anything else. I'm sure it was good, but I wondered if he would have chosen it if he had tried the \$20 cherry port or the \$14 award-winning cherry Beaujolais?

He provided a striking contrast to the Midwesterners I had seen happily and appreciatively sampling fruit wines that cost \$10 or less. Their tastes may not yet be educated or sophisticated. But as they sipped, traded glasses and compared impressions, they exuded a sense of fun that had escaped me during my harried days in Connecticut and only now am I regaining.

