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NH is wine country

A tasting guide to five local wineries

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Most wine-lovers seem to gravitate toward wines made in California, France or Italy. Some of the more adventurous consider selections from Oregon, Australia, Chile, Argentina and South Africa.

But what about New Hampshire?

If you have not tried wines from this state, now is the time. There are a number of winemakers who are dedicated to high-quality wines that can stand up to comparisons from larger world wineries.

"The quality of winemaking in this state is high," said Dr. Peter D. Oldak, owner of Jewell Towne Vineyards and current president of the New Hampshire Winery Association. "People are pleasantly surprised at the taste of our wines. They find them comparable to most European selections."

Currently there are 14 wineries in the state (find them all at www.nhwineryassociation.com). Most are run by owners as a second career. Oldak describes them as "wine people who are fed up with corporate America and want to get back to the land."

Grape country? Here?

It is not easy to grow wine grapes in New Hampshire, with its short growing season and harsh winters. However, there are a number of places across the country, such as Cornell University in New York, that have developed cold-hardy hybrids that can withstand the state's weather challenges. "Some of the cooler parts of the country have developed grapes vines that are hardy at 35 and 40 degrees below zero," Oldak said.

When it comes to global climate change, warmer temperatures would seem to benefit most wine makers, allowing them to grow more varieties of grapes, especially the red-wine grapes that require long periods



Misconceptions about NH Wines

Myth: New Hampshire wine is inferior.

Fact: The state produces a number of wines that can stand shoulder to shoulder with the world's best, and many have won medals at competitions both in the United States and internationally. Rich Collins from Jewell Towne Vineyards said, "It's not about whose region is best, it's about how you make the wines. Our ice wine is incredible, just as good as

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of warm temperatures to develop their flavor.

"Last year, when I was in Germany, they told me that their temperatures had increased 10 degrees from a decade ago," said Jim Zanello of Zorvino Vineyards. "They are able to grow more reds than before."

However, wine-makers worry about the extremes in weather that climate change could cause.

"I am more concerned about the violence of the weather swings," said Robert Dabrowski of Candia Vineyards. "The hail storms, excess winds, heavy rains. If it brings more moisture from the south to this area, then you can have more disease and late frosts. Those would be significant problems."

When consumers support local New Hampshire vineyards and wineries, they also help to keep the state green. "Whether you like wine or not, the grapes are taking up open land," said Frank Reinhold of Flag Hill. "Grapes take a lot of space to grow. If they were not there, house lots would be in their place."

Recently the Association created three New Hampshire wine and cheese trails — one in the Seacoast area, one along the western edge of the state, and one in the Merrimack Valley (see www.visitnh.gov, or look for brochures and wineries and tourist information stops). Oldak noted that most of the trails' wineries have tasting rooms, which provide a fun activity for residents and their out-of-town guests. And because wine changes from year to year, it makes sense to go back to the wineries to taste their new offerings each season.

"Someone said, 'Don't guzzle gas. Guzzle wine,'" Oldak said with a chuckle.

Here's a closer look at five wineries in the southern tier of New Hampshire. Can't afford a vacation to Napa? Take a day trip to one of these spots.

Candia Vineyards, 702 High St., Candia

Dabrowski's Candia Vineyards might be small — this year he hopes to produce more than 400 cases — but the quality of his wines would give California and European makers a run for their money. A self-professed wine geek, he is passionate about his wines. His focus has always been to get the best wine into the bottle.

"I can't explain it," Dabrowski said. "There is a fascination for sure. I ... always drank wine over everything else. It's my passion."

A financial analyst by trade, Dabrowski created his first wine in 1981. He didn't start to sell wines commercially until three years ago, primarily because people started to seek him out for his wines. Still, he will not sell a wine to the public that isn't a high-quality product. "I'm proud of them all," he said. "I don't release anything that I wouldn't want my best friend to bring to an important

anyone's, at a better price." Frank Reinhold of Flag Hill said, "All 50 states produce wine now. What's important is not that it tastes like Merlot, but whether you like it or dislike it. Stop measuring local wines against a standard that is r fair."

• **Myth:** New Hampshire only makes fruit wines.

Fact: While many state wineries produce fruit wines, most also make traditional grape wines, and some make only the grape variety

• **Myth:** Fruit wines are not real wines.

Fact: "Fruit wines are made exactly the same way as grape wines," Reinhold said. "Grape is a fruit, to expand your horizons. The beautiful thing about our apple cranberry wine is that the apples are from New Hampshire and the cranberries are from Massachusetts. Our blueberries come from Maine. These are truly local products."

Amy LaBelle of LaBelle Winery said, "It is important for people give the fruit wines a chance. It's not chardonnay, but it's not meant to be."

• **Myth:** New Hampshire wines are all sweet.

Fact: Just like any other region, this state produces wines that range from very dry to very sweet. Collier said, "New England likes sweet things. We sell more sweet than c wines, but we make good dry wines."

• **Myth:** All wineries, everywhere, grow their own grapes and fruit.

Fact: Most do not. Jim Zanello of Zorvino Vineyards said, "While driving through California, I was surprised at how many wineries don't grow their own grapes."

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dinner.”

Dabrowski planted his first vines on his Candia property in 1991. Now he grows approximately 600, and he prunes each one himself. He enjoys the opportunity to take guests on a stroll through his vines to discuss the growing process. “As a financial analyst, my job is to analyze and predict the future of the financial markets,” he said. “Winemaking is done the same way. I make decisions now that will impact the future of the wines.”

The actual wine creation is done only by Dabrowski in his basement winery, complete with a wine vault that has a 1930s bank-vault door that he bought for fun from eBay. He has a group of friends who not only enjoy his wines but are also willing to help with the bottling process. They are partly responsible for the whimsical bottle labels — Dabrowski passes their ideas along to the label artist, who makes them reality.

Dabrowski makes only grape wines and not fruit wines like many other wineries. It is what he prefers to drink himself. His wine selection includes these:

Viognier: For those who dislike oaky chardonnays, this is a brilliant, dry white wine with pronounced citrus notes. Dabrowski calls it his “wow” white wine. It pairs well with seafood dishes.

Chardonnay: A big, full-bodied white with oaky, buttery overtones.

Diamond: A white wine made from what was considered the first-quality American wine grape in the 1880s. The winery produces the only one in New Hampshire. Sweeter than the above-listed whites with pronounced grape overtones.

Riesling: An off-dry white wine that is very food-friendly. Good King Robert’s Red: A delightful, medium-bodied red wine that will please most palates.

Classic Cab: A traditional cabernet sauvignon that is mellow in flavor.

Noiret: Dabrowski’s “wow” red wine that is unlike anything else available. It has a rich red color and is stunning in flavor, with definite hints of pepper. This Noiret has won more competition medals than any other one in the world. Also, he has turned the wine into a chocolate that is produced by Ava Marie Handmade Chocolates in Peterborough.

Candia Vineyards wines can be purchased direct from the winery or in select southern New Hampshire stores, such as Hannaford supermarkets in Manchester, the Concord Food Coop, Moulton’s Market in Amherst, and Natural Choice Market in Hooksett. Dabrowski is happy to do a tasting by appointment. To schedule a tasting or order wines, call 867-9751 or visit www.candiavineyards.com.

LaBelle Winery, 100 Chestnut Hill Road, Amherst

Amy LaBelle has a clear memory of her first batch of wine. A corporate attorney, she lived in a 600-square-foot condominium in Boston, located in the shadow of the Prudential Tower. She created a gallon of blueberry wine in 2001, the week before Sept. 11.



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“They were telling people living around the Pru to evacuate,” she remembered. When the man she dated, who was in the military, convinced her to leave, “I packed one bag and put that first gallon of wine in the backseat of my car with pillows around it.”

Leave everything else, but take the wine. That kind of passion still drives LaBelle, and now her LaBelle Winery bottles 10 wine varieties, including the blueberry. “I put my heart in every bottle,” she said.

LaBelle caught the wine-making bug after a visit to a Nova Scotia winery on vacation. She calls it her light-bulb moment. Within a month she taught herself the basics and made that first gallon. She also completed the University of California-Davis wine program, which helped her learn the chemistry required to produce a quality bottle.

Today LaBelle lives with her husband, Cesar Arboleda, and their nine-month-old son, Jackson Alejandro (known as Jack), in their Amherst home, with the red barn down the hill in back that houses the small, boutique winery. At first, the couple continued to work their day jobs — she as a lawyer and he as an IT professional — and make the wine on the side. However, with the growth in the wine’s popularity and Jack’s birth less than a year ago, they finally hit overload. “The winery reached the point where it needed more attention, and she considered closing,” Arboleda said. Instead, they decided that he would work full-time for the winery and watch out for Jack. “I didn’t want her to close. It is her dream.”

When it comes time to bottle the wines, the whole family gets involved. “It’s a true family affair,” LaBelle said. “My parents, sister and friends ... we send them home with a bottle of wine, so they are happy.”

Last year, LaBelle Winery produced 1,200 cases of wine, both grape- and fruit-based. LaBelle gets local New Hampshire fruit whenever possible, and partners with growers such as Allison’s Orchard in Walpole. Grapes are the most difficult item to find locally, since most of the growers use them to produce their own wines. So she gets her grapes from the Finger Lakes region of New York.

The outside of the winery’s barn hides the elegant feel inside. Even though there are large stainless steel wine vats and other tools of the trade, elegance comes through, particularly in the tasting area. There guests will find a beautiful wood bar set on wine barrels, with wine racks as the backdrop and perhaps a cheese plate to go with the tasting. The elegance continues in the bottles’ labels and the classical music that fills the space.

“We made things classic by design to overcome the fruit wine bias,” LaBelle said. “We want this to be what people expect in a winery. There is a detailed craft into making wine. We want it to be fun, but we remain true to the age-old tradition of winemaking.”

LaBelle Winery’s selection includes these wines:

Dry Apple: A crisp, light, fresh wine made in the style of a riesling. It is not aged in oak, and is a blend of heirloom and conventional apples.

Heirloom Apple: This wine has a more robust, fruity and floral taste that is a little fuller on the palate than the dry apple.

Granite State Apple: An apple wine that has just a touch of maple syrup added. It has a crisp, fruity, slightly sweet flavor that pairs well with cheese or pork tenderloin.

Granite State Red: Combines wines made from Marechal Foch grapes and blueberries. Smooth on the palate, with floral and berry notes and soft tannins.

Seyval Blanc: A slow-fermented wine that has a delicate, fruity flavor.

Red Raspberry: A not-too-sweet wine that is fun and easy to drink. LaBelle said she has customers who find they crave this wine. It pairs well with chocolate.

Cranberry: A crisp, fresh-tasting wine that is not overly acidic. It is perfect for Thanksgiving or any poultry-based meal.

Blueberry: Made from New Hampshire blueberries, this is a light dinner wine that is great for summer. It pairs nicely with pork, turkey, chicken and pasta dinners.

Blanco Peach: A sweet dessert wine with floral and honey notes.

Jalapeño Pepper: Meant more as a cooking wine — though LaBelle has a customer who enjoys it by the glass — the hot and spicy beverage is good in salsas, marinades, dips, guacamole, dressings, fajitas and a Bloody Mary.

Customers may purchase LaBelle wines straight from the winery — either in person or via the Internet — or at stores around the state. Wine tasting is by appointment only. To schedule a tasting, order wines, or see a list of store locations, visit www.labellewinerynh.com or call 828-2923.

Zorvino Vineyards, 226 Main St., Sandown

Zorvino is the relatively new kid on the block. Owner Jim Zanello and his staff just started to sell wine in 2007. They have quickly created a Tuscan-style location that has become a destination for both wine lovers and anyone in need of a beautiful setting for an event.

Zanello became interested in wine-making on a trip to California. He bought the 80 acres in Sandown in 1999, and planted his first vines in 2000. His intention was to retire and make wines for himself. "I'm not retired anymore," he said. "I planted the vines to make wine for myself, but my friends wanted some." He motions to the large, rustic function hall. "I built this to be my workshop, and my friends said we should have a party in here first. Well, we are still partying."

The vineyard has approximately 600 vines of six different grape varieties. Wines are made not only from the in-house grapes, but also from ones brought in from the wine regions of Tuscany, Chile and California. Zorvino also produces fruit wines, which wine director Tom Zack described as "not overly sweet, with a dryness to the finish. We leave a bit of the tartness in. That way they

pair better with food.”

Zorvino wines include:

Chilean Chardonnay: A wine with tropical fruit flavors and toasty, caramel flavor from light oaking. Pairs well with seafood and chicken.

Reserve Chardonnay: A buttery, creamy wine that has a limited production.

Peachez 'n Cream: A light, fruity wine with a dry finish that is nice to drink in warm weather. It goes well with seafood or light chicken dishes.

Fragole Zee: The winery's best-selling wine, this is a Riesling with a touch of strawberry.

Riesling: Made from California grapes, this wine has peach, apple and mango flavors. It pairs well with seafood and hot, spicy Asian dishes.

Razzberry Delight: A semi-sweet raspberry wine for the summer. It has a dry finish and will pair with a wide range of foods.

White Zinfandel: The classic sweet wine that will go well with grilled or hot and spicy foods.

Carmenere: A red wine that will only get better with age. Made with grapes from Chile, it has a medium body, a mild black pepper finish, and a touch of licorice flavor.

Merlot: A full-bodied wine made from California grapes. Also has a slight okay flavor. Only 26 cases produced.

Cabernet Sauvignon: A big, bold wine with plenty of oak flavor.

Lambrusco: A fruity red wine that lingers on the palate.

Bacca Z: A full-bodied merlot with just a hint of black raspberry. (Bacca means berry in Italian.)

CranbreeZ: A cranberry wine made around Thanksgiving. Only 30 cases are made, and last year the winery sold 20 of them in the first week.

Zorvino hosts a number of events throughout the year, both private and public. There are regular wine tasting events (six wines paired with three appetizers for \$25) and monthly wine dinners (four courses with wine — price varies). They also have special holiday events, such as their Father's Day family buffet (\$25, and children under 12 half price). The winery may also be rented for weddings or other private celebrations.

This season a lot of work is being done to the winery's landscape. Soon there will be a new gazebo, waterfall and pond to highlight the Tuscan feel. Plans are being considered for nature trails through the wooded areas around the vineyard. “We want this to be a destination where people will come to just hang out and enjoy the wine and the scenery,” Zack said.

Zorvino wines can only be purchased at the winery or from the Web site. The hours are Tuesday through Saturday, noon to 5 p.m., or by appointment. For a complete list of upcoming events, or to plan your own function at the winery, visit www.zorvino.com or call 887-8463.

Jewell Towne Vineyards, 183 Whitehall Road, South Hampton

Dr. Peter D. Oldak's wine adventure started with six vines planted on his 12-acre South Hampton farm just to

make jelly and pies. He made wine with the leftover grapes. Each year the E.R. physician planted more grapes and made more wine, so much that he began to sell it at the end of his driveway — an adult lemonade stand. Then, in 1992, his Alden rose won a silver medal in the American Wine Society's amateur competition, and everything changed.

Jewell Towne Vineyards began to sell wines commercially in 1994. The walls of the winery's tasting area are lined with dozens of bottles draped with their prize medals from various competitions. Twenty varieties of grapes grow in the fields, and the winery brings in other grapes from New York and California. There are 28 different wines produced, and Rich Collins, director of sales and marketing, estimates they will make 4,500 cases of wine this year. That's 54,000 bottles.

"We grow the cool climate grape varieties," Collins said. "The stuff you've never heard of. Then we bring in grapes from other regions, mainly the big reds that don't grow well here. If we had the choice, we would not make the cabernet, shiraz and zinfandel, but that is what the market demands."

Collins believes the current movement toward local products will lead people to try New Hampshire wines and realize just how good they taste. He also thinks the current economy has made people turn to more affordable wines. Many of Jewell Towne's offerings are \$10 or less.

Customers can tell a bottle made with 100 percent winery-grown grapes from one made with grapes from other regions by the vintage date on the label. If there is a year, then the grapes were grown here. Some of the more popular selections include these:

Aurore 2007: A medium-bodied dry white wine with hints of citrus and tropical fruits.

Cayuga White 2007: A dry wine with tropical fruit notes.

South Hampton White 2007: A semi-sweet wine with grapefruit and Muscat flavors.

Vidal 2007: A new, full-bodied, off-dry white wine with slight citrus and pear flavors.

Vignoles 2007: A full-bodied, semi-sweet white wine with hints of orange blossom and honey.

Alden 2006: A clean, crisp, floral rose with soft tannins and a hint of lychee and oak.

Landot Noir 2007: A spicy, but mellow, red wine with cranberry, black raspberry, and licorice aromas.

Leon Millot 2007: A full-bodied wine with hints of black raspberry, leather and tobacco.

Marechal Foch 2007 Private Reserve: A dry, full-bodied red with a red raspberry aroma.

Vidal Ice Wine 2006: A sweet dessert wine made from grapes that have frozen on the vine. Has a hint of honey and apricot.

Jewell Towne wines are widely distributed throughout New Hampshire, including in many state liquor stores. The wines may also be purchased at the vineyard, where tours and tastings are offered all year. The hours are Wednesday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, noon to 5 p.m. For directions to

the winery, and a complete list of stores that sell the wines, visit www.jewelltownvineyards.com or call 394-0600.

Flag Hill Winery and Distillery, 297 North River Road, Lee

The land that Flag Hill Winery and Distillery occupies has been a working farm since the 1700s. Owner Frank Reinhold grew up here. His father ran a dairy farm from 1950 until he stopped operations in 1964. After Reinhold spent time in the Navy, serving in both Vietnam and the Gulf, he and his wife, Linda, returned to the farm in 1985 to care for his parents. But what would he do with the farm?

“Back then, nobody had a successful winery in the state,” Reinhold said. “But I noticed that we were in the same latitude as the Finger Lakes area of New York. And technology has developed hybrids [vines] that can tolerate these colder climates.”

Reinhold planted his first acre of grapes in 1990, and opened the doors to Flag Hill Winery in 1996. Last year he produced 3,500 cases of wine, both grape and fruit wines. In 2004, he opened the first distillery in New Hampshire.

“If you are a winery and you have excess wine or unmarketable wine, what do you do with it?” he asked. “You distill it and make brandy. Then we decided to make vodka, but we wanted it to be different from everyone else. So we made it with apples.”

All of Flag Hill’s grape wines are made from grapes grown in Reinhold’s vineyard. At harvest time, they are picked by the public. In fact, there are so many people who want to participate that the winery holds a lottery to choose the 600 workers necessary to complete the harvest.

Grapes are only brought in from other places to make the brandy. The apples for his fruit wines and vodka come from Apple Hill farm in Concord. The cranberries are from Massachusetts and the blueberries are from Maine.

There are 19 wines available at Flag Hill. These include:

Apple: A semi-sweet wine with a light fruity taste.

Apple-Cranberry: A crisp wine that tastes similar to your favorite juice, but with a kick.

Wild Blueberry: A bright semi-sweet wine that can be served either chilled or at room temperature.

Seyval Blanc: A crisp, semi-dry white wine that is lightly aged in oak.

Vignoles: A crisp, semi-sweet white wine with melon and pear notes.

Cayuga White: A semi-sweet white that has citrus and exotic fruit notes with a well-balanced acidity.

Niagara: A semi-sweet white wine made from Native American grapes.

Marechal Foch: A medium-bodied red wine that has a deep, dark color.

Chancellor: A light semi-sweet red that is similar to a Beaujolais-style wine.

DeChaunac: A sweet red wine with floral notes.

Heritage White and Heritage Red: Two sweet dessert wines blended with maple syrup.

North River Port: Aged in oak, this is the state's first classic port, with the flavors of black licorice, clove, almond and oak.

Blueberry Moon: An after-dinner port made with wild Maine blueberries.

"Winemaking is very easy if you produce a perfect grape," Reinhold said. "But nobody produces a perfect grape. It is the winemaker's job to adjust for that."

Flag Hill has three distilled spirits selections. One is the General John Stark vodka, which is triple-distilled for a smooth taste. This vodka is blended with maple syrup to make the Sugar Maple Liqueur, and with cranberries to make the Cranberry Liqueur.

Flag Hill also sells high-quality extra-virgin olive oils, some of which are infused with concentrated flavor oils and dry ingredients to create herbed, garlic, orange and Fra Diavlo (red pepper) varieties. Also, chef Ted McCormick has created a line of spice rubs in smoky barbecue, spicy jerk, and fathoms of flavor varieties.

Reinhold noted, "With an agricultural base, diversification is critical. When somebody comes in here, they should find something they are interested in. Also, if the weather goes south, we have some stabilization in the marketplace."

The winery hosts private and public events in its dining room and under the large, white event tent that overlooks most of the vineyard. Monthly dinners feature menus that McCormack plans around ingredients from local farms. There are seasonal events throughout the year.

Many of Flag Hill's products are sold at state liquor stores and other shops throughout the state. Or they may be purchased from the winery. The tasting room and gift store are open Wednesday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. To see a schedule of upcoming dinners or events, visit www.flaghill.com or call 659-2949.



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