

## In the Vineyard with Mike Bevins

By Barbara Rasko

Many have contributed to the rebirth and growth of the grape and wine industry in Iowa. Like the sun, soil and rain that is so critical to success in the vineyard, the Iowa Department of Agriculture & Land Stewardship has quietly provided the framework and organization to stimulate success for the infant industry.

Mike Bevins, State Horticulturist for the Iowa Department of Agriculture & Land Stewardship (IDALS), was involved from the beginning. In 1999 grape growers and winemakers Ron Mark, Paul Tabor, and Bill Brown\* visited with then Secretary of Agriculture Patty Judge and Bevins.

”We had a long discussion about the value of grape growing as a means to further diversify Iowa’s agricultural base, the value added benefits of turning grapes into wine, and the economic development potential of a grape and wine industry in Iowa,” says Bevins.

That initial meeting prompted the department to host an Iowa Wine Industry Meeting on January 7, 2000. In attendance were individual grape growers and winemakers, representatives from Iowa State University, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Resource Conservation and Development, and guest Jim Anderson, Grape and Wine Program Director from the Missouri Department of Agriculture. When the group met again later in January, they were joined by a representative from Iowa Department of Economic Development, and were officially designated as the Iowa Wine and Grape Advisory Council by Secretary of Agriculture Patty Judge.

The Council met regularly and, Bevins explains, “Our mission was to re-establish the Iowa Grape and Wine Culture into a viable value added agricultural industry that benefits Iowans by encouraging agricultural diversity, economic development, and tourism. Another obvious advantage for Iowans is to have locally grown grapes which produce quality wines!”

Iowa primary production of two annual crops, corn and soybeans, has inherent risks associated with soil conservation and water quality. Increased production of grapes provides a permanent ground cover in the wide alleys between rows which greatly reduces soil erosion and acts as a filter to reduce sediment and nutrients from entering our water ways.

Economic development starts with the fact that grapes are a high value crop and their fermentation into wine is a perfect example of adding value to an agricultural crop. Growing grapes and producing wine are labor intensive with high input costs. For every dollar of income earned by wine producers, and additional 1.4 dollars are earned

elsewhere in the economy. Tourism – the trips to wineries by local residents and out-of-state visitors – dramatically increases the economic impact of the industry.

“With a clear vision of the desired future for the grape and wine industry, two primary objectives were created: to establish 1000 acres of vineyards to supply quality grapes to Iowa wineries and to establish fifteen new commercial wineries using Iowa grapes, all by the year 2010. Within a few months, we identified four needs critical to meeting our objectives: 1) fund cost share programs to assist vineyards; 2) establish producers for rooted cuttings; 3) provide resources for winery start-up costs; and 4) provide technical assistance to growers and winemakers,” he said.

“The groundwork was laid in 2000 when Council members held 15 seminars and education events, formed The Iowa Grape Growers Association, created a database of active and potential grape growers, created a resource listing, published news articles, obtained a Rural Development grant, initiated a Grape Production Handbook, provided information on the economic impact of a wine industry and met with legislators.

By 2001, the Iowa legislature created the Iowa Grape and Wine Development Commission within IDALS. The Secretary of Agriculture appointed five members to the commission, and at the inaugural meeting of the two growers, two winemakers, and a retail seller, Dr. Bill Brown was elected as Chairperson. The commission was not appropriated any funds, but grants received through the Department of Natural Resources and the IDALS were used to hire a viticulturist, Eli Bergmeier, to provide technical assistance to grape growers, start research trials at Iowa State University, and conduct an initial survey of the grape and wine industry.

Starting in 2002 the Commission received an annual \$75,000 appropriation from the legislature to continue funding the viticulture position and research. . In 2006 the funding was increased to 5% of the wine gallonage tax (\$1.75 per gallon) which provided the commission with money to hire an enologist, Dr. Murli Dharmdhikari, start a wine diagnostic lab (see the interview with Dr. Sebastian Donner beginning on page 12), and continue research at ISU. In addition, funds were used to hire a viticulturist at Des Moines Area Community College, provided administrative support from the IDALS, start a scholarship program (see page 29), and fund numerous wine events and festivals.

Today the IDALS continues their organizing and facilitating functions for the grape and wine industry. They also support the industry in a variety of ways. For example they showcased Iowa wines through the Iowa Wine Village to visitors (over 40,000 in the last two years) at the Home and Garden Show at Hy-Vee Hall in Des Moines. Just this spring, the IDALS expanded the on-line sensitive crops directory to include vineyards. Since certain herbicides can be fatal to grapes, pesticide applicators need to know where all of the newly planted vineyards are located. Over 250 vineyards locations have been identified, and “No Spray” signs, specifically designed to be visible to pesticide applicators, are available.

“The growth of the wine and grape industry in Iowa has exceeded expectations. In 2000 when we discussed having fifteen new wineries by 2010, we wouldn’t have thought it even conceivable there may be sixty new wineries in the state by 2008. The expansion of

vineyards should hit at least 1000 acres by 2010 based on the current rate of planting but with the number of new wineries in the state the demand for grapes continues very strong. IDALS completed a second survey of wineries and vineyards in 2006 and only 44% of the responding wineries stated they were able to purchase enough Iowa-grown grapes to meet their needs. We wanted see many small family vineyards and wineries rather than a few large operations in order to maximize the agricultural, economic, and environmental benefits and it appears that's just what is happening," says Bevins.

The goal is still to benefit Iowans by encouraging agricultural diversity, economic development, and tourism. Several state employees help the industry meet their goals. LuAnn Reinders, Iowa Department of Economic Development, has been the driving force behind the Iowa Beer and Wine Promotion Board. She publishes the wine and beer directory, keeps the wine and beer Website current for festivals and special events ([www.iowawineandbeer.com](http://www.iowawineandbeer.com)), and works with the Board to provide grants to promote Iowa wine and beer through consumer events. Denny Michel, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, is an ex-officio member who provides advice and guidance to the Commission. Paul Ovrom was hired by the IDALS as the program manager for wine and grape development in Iowa. He works with the Commission to review all the requests for funds, develops the appropriate contracts, ensures funds are disbursed and properly expended.

Editor's Note: Dr. Bill Brown Timber Ridge Vineyard, Leon, IA., Dr. Paul Tabor, Tabor Home Vineyard and Winery, Baldwin, IA and Ron Mark Summerset Winery, Indianola, IA, attended the original meetings with Individuals representing vineyards, wineries, retailers, academia, government, the legislature, the Des Moines Register, and Farm Bureau. They became members of the original Commission.

### **Iowa Wine and Grape Stats**

7.3 % of wine sales in Iowa are of Iowa wines (native IA wine market share)

Iowans purchase 7.65 bottles/capita for adults 21+ years old compared with a national bottles/capita for adults 21+ years old of 15 bottles.

Iowa ranks 23<sup>rd</sup> in the nation in wine production and 14<sup>th</sup> in number of wineries.

Statistics are not yet available for rank for grape production in Iowa.

It is estimated that 50% of Iowa native wine is made from Iowa grapes.

-- Mike White  
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