

In Entertainment

- Insider Homepage
- Events
- Event Finder
- Movies/TV/DVD
- Movie Finder
- Movie Talk
- TV Listings
- Eats & Drinks
- Restaurants
- Recipe Box
- Wine Report
- Living
- Lifestyle
- Homestyle
- Fitness
- Michigan's Best
- Casino Guide
- Horoscope
- Lottery
- Crossword

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Essentials

- Home Page
- Photo Galleries
- Weather
- Horoscope
- Lottery
- Crossword
- Contact Us

Opinions

- Editorials
- Columnists
- CyberSurveys
- Forums

Autos

- Autos Insider
- Autos Blog
- Drive
- Car Reviews
- Latest Deals
- Model Reports
- Joyrides

Business

- Business
- Money & Life
- Careers
- Find a Job
- Real Estate
- Find a Home

Metro

- Metro/State
- Wayne
- Oakland
- Macomb
- Livingston
- Communiting
- Obituaries
- Death Notices
- Schools
- Detroit History
- Nation/World
- Nation/World
- Politics/Gov
- Health
- Religion
- Technology

Sports

- Sports Insider
- Olympics
- Lions/NFL
- Super Bowl
- Pistons/NBA
- Red Wings/NHL
- Tigers/MLB
- Shock/WNBA
- MSU
- U-M
- More Colleges
- High Schools
- Golf
- Motor Sports
- Outdoors
- More Sports
- Scoreboards

Entertainment

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Wineries Unlimited 2006: An education you don't get at winemaking school

So you want to start a winery? You aren't alone. The number of American wineries is growing at the rate of 10 to 15 percent a year, and recent figures show that for the first time the majority of new ones are outside California.

But where do you go to learn the ropes? In lieu of enrolling in a handful of university programs, most of which are in California, you can sign up for the 30th annual Wineries Unlimited Conference and Trade Show March 12-15, in Lancaster, Pa. It's a one-stop "shopping" event where you not only can hear the experts on growing and making wine, but purchase everything from tanks and barrels to backhoes and sprayers, and bottles and corks.

Billed as the largest wine symposium east of the Rockies, the marathon four-day event is under the stewardship of Robert Merletti, 36. This year it will celebrate its 30th anniversary with headlines of the wine world, including Michigan's own Bryan Ulbrich of Peninsula Cellars, and topics that are crucial to running a profitable winery in the 21st century.



Vineyard and Winery Management

Learning sessions often include tastings to illustrate the speaker's point.

"We're really expanding the program to accommodate all the needs of our audience," said Merletti, president and publisher of Vineyard and Winery Management, sponsor of the event. And while the signature educational session has been the all-day meeting with newcomers to assist them with everything from site selection to accounting issues, Merletti has his eye on veteran growers nearing retirement, and added seminars on "the next generation" -- "how do I hand this business down to my kids and avoid the tax consequences?"

What enology or viticulture school is going to cover that?

The main event will be a love fest to Riesling. Ernst Loosen, the most avid promoter of Riesling around the world and a noted producer in Germany, will deliver the keynote address on "Reports from the Riesling Revolution." He also will lead a seminar on growing Riesling sustainably in Germany and another on making world-class Riesling in Germany and the Columbia Valley.

Loosen (pronounced Low-zen) is carrying on his family's 200-year-tradition of Riesling production in the Mosel at Dr. Loosen Estate and is a partner with Chateau Ste. Michelle in Washington in the making of the critically acclaimed Erioca Rieslings.

The Riesling program also includes a growers' roundtable with Virginia's Bob Steeves, who owns and is rehabilitating the Kilaurwen Vineyard, a rare, old Riesling site in the state, and John McGregor of McGregor Vineyards in New York, which started planting vinifera on Keuka Lake in 1971. Their discussion is in addition to two others on making dry-style and semi-dry/sweet-style wines. Those panels will include the pioneering California grower Jerry Lohr of J. Lohr Winery; Bryan Ulbrich of Peninsula Cellars in Michigan; Gary Crump of Priam in Connecticut; and from New York, Thomas Lazlo of Heron Hill, Morten Hallgren of Ravines Cellars, and consulting winemaker Martha Gioumousis. Noted enologist Dr. Thomas Henick-Kling of Cornell University will speak on winemaking issues. Riesling will be on everybody's breath.

Another key theme will be "sustainability" in the East (aka viable growing practices), with talks by Jim Law of Linden Vineyards, Virginia viticulturist Lucie Morton and New York's John Santos of Hazlitt 1852 Vineyards. Wineries Unlimited program director Richard Leahy explains sustainability this way: "It's the ability to profitably produce, with minimal environmental impact, high-quality grapes and wine over time -- planting Pinot Noir in Virginia is not sustainable!"

Sandra Silfven

New column every Thu.

Sandra Silfven has written about wine for more than 20 years. She's a longtime copy editor at The Detroit News, as well as a former restaurant critic. Her advice to newbies: "If I can figure out this stuff, so can you!" E-mail her at ssilfven@detnews.com



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Vineyard and Winery Management

Attendees often take a shopping list to the trade show.

Fruit wines are also addressed this year, with the stars of blackberry and raspberry wine production: Dr. Joseph Fiola, specialist in viticulture and small fruit at the University of Maryland; Mike Williams of Winery at Wilcox in Pennsylvania; and Sandi Vojta of Prairie Berry Winery in South Dakota.

Wineries Unlimited offers a shotgun approach to its learning conference, offering three concurrent, changing seminars all day, starting at 8 or 8:30 a.m., and running a day and a half. Attendees can choose sessions related to growing or making wine, or managing the business and tasting room. This year, the last day is devoted to one topic -- bottling and closure issues. Mark Friszolowski, winemaker at Childress Vineyards in North Carolina, will moderate a presentation on everything from bottles and box technology to screwcaps. A sitdown dinner with live music will cap off the Best of the East Tasting & Dinner the evening of March 14. The Top 10 wines east of the Rockies winning the most medals in 2005 will be honored.

The trade show, run by Bob Mignarri for the past 12 years, is held in two halls with 176 exhibitors spread over 251 booths. "It's rare to hear I couldn't find 'X,'" he said. Adds Robert Merletti: "People don't come here to review; they come here to buy" -- everything from tanks to labels to critter-control devices.

Wineries Unlimited is a unique affair, founded by wine promoters Bill Moffett and wife Hope Merletti. In 1976, they launched the conference and trade show, along with the International Eastern Wine Competition and the magazine Eastern Grapegrower & Winery News, which eventually became today's Vineyard and Winery Management, focusing on the entire North American wine industry.

Their original concept for Wineries Unlimited grew and matured much as the industry outside of California did, with memorable keynoters over the years, including Robert Parker, the world's most influential wine critic; Dr. Curtis Ellison, who famously trumpeted the health benefits of wine on "60 Minutes;" and last year's Susan Wine and Barry Ransom, telling how they sold Manhattan on New York state wines by capitalizing on an all-inclusive tasting room called Vintage New York.

Moffett and Merletti sold Vineyard and Winery Management and its many operations, including the magazine, three wine competitions and various industry services, to Hope's son, Robert, and wife Jennifer two years ago.

Longtime attendee and supporter Jim Law of Virginia says, "Wineries Unlimited has been instrumental in the infrastructure of the Eastern wine industry, principally due to the trade show and its location -- not California, where there are too many 'local' suppliers who do not service the East.

"Most industry veterans," he said, "make it a regular event to check in with suppliers and run into colleagues to get the latest updates and gossip."

A couple years ago, it was Patrick Duffeler of Virginia's Williamsburg Winery who so succinctly summed up the beauty and irony of Wineries Unlimited: "I don't know of any other group of people who get together to talk about their problems and successes like wine people. If you did that in any other business," said the ex-Kokak and Philip Morris Europe executive, "you would be fired."

Wineries Unlimited 2006

What: Wine industry conference and trade show.

When: March 12-15

Where: Lancaster Host Resort & Conference Center, Lancaster, Pa.

To register and see the complete program: Go to wvm-online.com/wu or call (888) 289-6650, Ext.

12

-- January 12, 2006