



Local News

Q&A: Leonard Olson

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Leonard Olson, from Founders Wine Cellar in Baroda, shows off a bottle of wine as grapes are delivered to make more of the drink. John Madill / H-P staff

Pioneering winemaker is back in the game

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BARODA - If there's a name that's synonymous with the origin of Southwest Michigan's modern wine industry, it would have to be Leonard Olson.

Although he discounts the importance of it - if he hadn't done it, someone else would have, he says - he planted the first European wine grapes in the area in 1968. He founded Tabor Hill Vineyard and Wine Cellar, the first new Michigan winery since Prohibition. In fact, the Knights of the Vine, an organization that promotes American wine and wine-producing regions, recognized him as the founder of the premium wine industry in Middle America.

Olson said his first tasting room opened in 1972, and there were only four others in the area at the time, all in existence since Prohibition. Now there are more than 16, and the industry is booming.

Olson, who left Tabor Hill in 1982, has founded a new winery. Its name reflects his history - Founder's Wine Cellar. It's at 8961 Hills Road in downtown Baroda, on the south side of the Baroda City Mills building.

"We opened here on July 14, 2009," Olson said. "Bastille Day weekend."

Though people associate Baroda with a number of wineries, they're outside the village or even the township limits.

Olson, who has won numerous prizes for his wines, took a few minutes off processing grapes to answer some questions from H-P Staff Writer William F. Ast III.

What got you back into the game?

I would say, just my love of the product, and what it represents, and what it means to this community. I just was not ready to retire.

Other wineries have Baroda mailing addresses, but yours is the first to actually be in Baroda. How does that feel?

It's a pretty neat thing. The new wine trail map is coming out shortly, which will bring more awareness of what we're doing. It's interesting. If you're in Europe, 90 percent of the wineries are in small towns like Baroda. The big estate ones are the ones that are out in the country.

How do you feel about Baroda's future?

I'm excited about it. ... I think we'll probably see another tasting room in the area. I could imagine someone putting in a brewery, a candy and sundae shop like there used to be. I don't know about this, but I think in time we'll see two or three B&Bs. Baroda is becoming somewhat the gateway to wine country.

How was the year?

I missed a few years here while I was living in Kentucky. But this could be the best wine harvest we've ever had. The grapes, almost every single variety, were picked at the perfect sugar-acid-pH balance as you could ask.

We didn't have any freeze whatsoever. We had enough rain early in the year to nourish the grapes and get them moving. Then it was dry when they flowered, then September and October was a nice stretch that caused slow but perfect ripening.

Great wines come from temperate climates. In those temperate climates, every one of the great wine-growing regions has a body of water. We have Lake Michigan, of course.

How about the future of the wine industry in Southwest Michigan?

I'm extremely bullish on it. I think it's going to be fantastic. Right now the world is becoming more aware of what we have. The growers are maturing, the wine makers are maturing, and there are outstanding wines in every community.

Do you have any favorites among your current offerings?

That's like asking which of my children is my favorite. I'm partial to our Cabernet as a red, and Oak Chardonal as a white. We have Lakeside Breeze, a demi sec style. I would be drinking one of those if I were drinking right at this minute. And Married in the Vineyard, a Cabernet Sauvignon-Cabernet Franc blend. We had put the grapes in boxes, they were unidentified, and we had no way to identify them, so they became one in the vineyard. Married in the Vineyard.

When you're all by yourself, what do you drink?

Oh, I'm drinking wine. That's what it's all about.

And what do you do for fun when you're off and aren't making wine.

Off. That's a good one. Fishing is really my passion, other than wine. But I haven't been on the Old St. Joe in a couple of years.

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