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Thursday, June 5, 2008

Sandra Silfven

International Eastern Wine Competition offers the inside track on wine finds



Everybody loves insider information, and if you peruse the results of large, international wine competitions to find out what the judges in their white lab coats liked best, you always feel kind of smug that you know more than the next guy.

The International Eastern Wine Competition (IEWC), held annually in upstate New York, is one such barometer of winemaking in Michigan and around the East because so many American wineries send entries.

The competition, in its 32nd year, was started by Bill Moffett and Hope Merletti, who founded Vineyard and Winery Management Magazine back then, too, in Watkins Glen, N.Y. This makes it one of the granddaddies of wine judgments, predating most state fair wine competitions.

This year, there were a record 2,209 entries from around the world and 38 states.

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A unique segment of the competition is the Riesling Championship, where entries especially from New York, Michigan, Colorado and Washington, and the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Ontario, are hot competitors.

I view the winners' list as a go-to guide for what to buy -- and to be surprised.

My Top 10 'ah ha!' finds:

- The Best White Wine of the competition, and the winner of the Riesling Championship, were one and the same: the 2007 **Eroica** Riesling, \$22, made at **Chateau Ste. Michelle** in Washington. It's a collaboration of the Chateau's winemaker, Bob Bertheau, and Germany's modern-day Riesling pioneer, Ernst Loosen of **Dr. Loosen** estate in the Mosel.
- Cabernet Franc is the Great Red Hope for wineries in the East, and nabbing gold was **Ventosa Vineyards**, a large, moneyed property on Seneca Lake near Geneva, N.Y., but notably among the list of silver winners was Michigan's own little **Mackinaw Trail** in Manistique -- yes, the Upper Peninsula. The grapes are grown by **Lemon Creek Vineyards** in Southwest Michigan.
- Remember my recent praise for the **Creekbend Vineyards** Catawba in Indiana? Proprietor Bill Oliver of Oliver Vineyards in Bloomington just got more affirmation that his work and investment in the special Southern Indiana vineyard are paying off. It got gold at this contest, too.
- Plugging away at high-quality fruit wines is Mike Beck of **Uncle John's Fruithouse Winery** in St. Johns, Mich.: gold for apple wine! It's fitting, as that's where families have gone for generations for cider and doughnuts every fall.
- Chambourcin is the other red-wine grape that holds so much promise for cold-climate regions. It's typical for a Pennsylvania or New Jersey winery to come out on top with this one, but the gold went to a vintner in the heartland: **Blue Sky** in the Shawnee Hills of Southern Illinois.
- For Chardonnays with low or no oak, priced \$15 or less, the double gold went to **Pelee Island Winery** for its 2007 vintage -- it's located less than an hour's drive from downtown Detroit in Kingsville, Ontario. Awarded bronze was Michigan's new **Forty-Five North** in Lake Leelanau. It was in good company with the likes of **Rodney Strong**, **Dancing Bull** and **Forest Glen**. And oh, by the way, Ohio's **Ferrante Winery** collected bronze, too.
- Gewurztraminer proved another strong suit for wineries outside California. While the Golden State's **Navarro** predictably scored gold, the rest of the golds and silvers went to **Peconic Bay** (Long Island), Michigan's **Brys Estate**, **Dr. Konstantin Frank** (New York), **Uncle John's Fruithouse Winery** (Michigan), **Peninsula Cellars** (Michigan) and **Wagner** (New York).
- Pinot Blanc and Auxerrois, both traditional grapes of France's Alsace region, are looking good in the East. *All* the medals were nabbed by wineries outside the West Coast. **Lieb Family Cellars** on the

North Fork of Long Island got the only gold, and the only silvers went to Michigan: the 2007 Pinot Blanc from **Brys Estate** and Woodland White (made from Auxerrois) from **Chateau Fontaine**.

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Hope Merletti and Bill Moffett, center, and the whole crew of judges who last month decided the winners of the 2008 International Eastern Wine Competition in Watkins Glen, N.Y. Merletti and Moffett founded the competition 32 years ago. (Vineyard and Winery Management magazine)

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(updated hourly. Rankings as of 10 am)

• Stop the presses: The over-\$20 2007 Pinot Noir from Michigan's **Bowers Harbor Vineyards** won a double gold, in the company of wineries from Oregon and Napa Valley. Michigan's **Black Star Farms** 2006 Pinot Noir got a silver. There were 18 silvers for Pinot Noir, and all but the Black Star and two others were from California.

• New York, Michigan, Washington and the Okanagan Valley (British Columbia) dominated all Riesling categories. In Michigan, **Chateau Grand Traverse** got a double gold for its 2005 Riesling Ice Wine, and **Peninsula Cellars** grabbed golds for its 2006 semi-sweet and 2006 dry Rieslings, and Michigan's "new guy," **Forty-Five North** , got gold for its 2006 dry Riesling. Only a few California wineries (including **Jekel** and **Kendall-Jackson**) braved the competition.

A medal for the name

In browsing the winners' list, several would get a medal from me for their name alone: **Happley ImPeared** apple-pear wine from **Bishop's Orchards Winery** in Connecticut; **Rigamarole White** , Okanagan Valley; **Earthquake Zinfandel** , Lodi, Calif.; **Snowy Peaks Syrah** , Colorado; **Purgatory Cellars Persimmon** , Illinois; and **Little Boomey Shiraz** , Australia.

And you have to love **Beans Creek** in Manchester, Tenn., located on Beans Creek. It silvered for Red Muscadine, a sweet wine I think I don't want to taste that comes mostly from hot, humid areas of the East Coast, but according to Wikipedia, has more antioxidants than many other well-known wines and five times as much resveratrol than ordinary red wines – that's the "wonder" nutrient to protect our hearts and make us live longer.

Beans Creek owner Tom Brown made his first wine in a pickle crock in his mother's kitchen in the company of his childhood friends. He was 24, and the year was 1976. He advanced from home winemaking to a commercial winery in 2004.

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