

Vineyards of the Berkshires and Pioneer Valley

By **Brian McDermott** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 28, 2013

SOUTHAMPTON — A blue and tan barn swallow loops by a bright red barn. A couple lounges in Adirondack chairs with glasses of cabernet franc and riesling on the armrests, while a group unpacks a picnic and uncorks a bottle of red wine. The view begins with straight green lines of grape vines and extends to The Seven Sisters summits beyond.

It may sound like Burgundy, but the Black Birch Winery in Southampton is less than a two-hour drive from Boston. The winery's 2012 opening has added to a small but growing Western Massachusetts wine trail that extends deep into the Berkshires, and visitors are beginning to take note.

"This is how it used to be in Napa," said Cory Telman as he and his wife, Kate, sampled one of Black Birch's white wines.

Known for its embrace of local farms, the area has always had the agricultural mindset and scenery for vineyards. But it didn't have the right climate. Now, thanks to cold-resistant grapevines developed by Cornell University and the University of Minnesota, global warming, and the popularity of microwineries, vineyards in the western part of the state are starting to firmly take root.



BRIAN MCDERMOTT FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

At Black Birch Winery in Southampton, a view over the vines at the distant Seven Sisters.

Black Birch joined other Pioneer Valley wineries like Mount Warner Vineyards in Hadley, Amherst Farm Winery, and Mineral Hills Winery in Florence. Heading west into the Berkshires, you can taste locally bottled wines on weekends at Les Trois Emme Winery in New Marlborough, Furnace Brook Winery in Richmond, and Balderdash Cellars in Pittsfield.

“We support each other in what we’re doing,” said Wayne Eline who with wife, Mary Jane, owns Les Trois Emme Winery, which celebrated its 10th anniversary this summer. Eline welcomes the new vineyards and hopes even more wineries will open in the area.

While visiting all the wineries would be too much driving for a day trip, each offers a friendly detour while visiting other attractions in the area. Part of their charm is the unpretentious, friendly vibe.

“Being small gives us a great deal of latitude and initiative to do something unique and different,” said Eline, a former high school chemistry teacher. That unique spirit is paying off with more visitors and sales. Last year they sold 2,000 cases of their trademarked Stingy Jack’s Pumpkin Wine, and they now sell wines at 300 stores around the state.

Black Birch is growing too, with plans to quadruple the size of its vineyard to eight acres next year. Co-owner Ed Hamel said that a warmer climate and new varieties of cold-weather grapevines have allowed them to plant grapes like chardonnay and pinot noir that previously couldn’t handle New England winters. Their goal is to grow all their grapes in their own vineyard by 2018.

“People here love the fact that you can work off the land,” said Michelle Kersbergen, another Black Birch co-owner.

Balderdash Cellars owners Christian and Donna Hanson bottle their wines with the help of volunteers in Pittsfield, using premium grapes they buy from California. After Christian earned a degree in viticulture from the University of California Davis, Donna

Related

- **If you go to vineyards in Western Mass. . .**
- **For solitude and stunning views, head west (of Boston)**
- **Smackdown: Berkshires north vs. south**
- **An online guide to Western Mass. byways**

persuaded him to leave the Napa Valley and start a winery in the Berkshires. They started bottling on the site of a former bakery.

“We don’t want to be snobby,” said Christian. “Hopefully people appreciate the fun and the good wine at the same time.”

You can sense that fun hearing the stories that explain how each type of wine at Balderdash Cellars was named. Joyride Pinot Noir comes from the time when, in high school, Donna Hanson’s Vespa was stolen while she was at cheerleading practice. She had left the keys in the moped, and was watching from the top of a cheer pyramid as the thief drove away.

Jeff Siegal writes the popular blog The Wine Curmudgeon, and he champions drinking local wines. He said the quality of regional wines like those in New England has steadily improved as viticulturists gain more experience and education. “Winemaking is as much about learning through doing as anything else,” he said.

Back at Black Birch, Hamel is setting up for an outdoor tasting on a sunny Friday afternoon. He said it wouldn’t surprise him to see another 15 wineries open over the next 20 years in the Berkshires and the Pioneer Valley. For now, he said, “we’ve got a lot of sweat equity into this, we’ve got passion, and we’ve got a lot of joy.”

Brian McDermott can be reached at brianpmcdermott@gmail.com.



BRIAN MCDERMOTT FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Tasting with co-owner Ian Modestow (left) and Kate and Cory Telman.