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Michigan winery has its eyes on Argentina, and a pencil saves the day

Sandra Silfven

For most regional American wineries, managing the vineyard in their backyard is about all they can handle. But for one Michigan vintner, the focus is shifting -- to the Southern Hemisphere.

New column every Thu.

Chateau Chantal, on Northwest Michigan's Old Mission Peninsula, is one of the largest grape growers on that finger of land jutting out into Lake Michigan. That part of their business will never change, but now, in the off season, their focus will be on Argentina, where principal owner Bob Begin and his team of investors have signed papers to purchase 136 acres in the Lujan de Cuyo region, a "county" in the province of Mendoza, the country's famous winegrowing area.

The farm has 43 acres of mature Malbec and seven acres of Bonarda, which some vintners use for blending, but Begin may try it as a straight varietal.

His plan is to produce reds to sell in Michigan and the local Argentinian market.

But why Argentina?

"Apples and cherries grow well in Michigan; citrus and vinifera either cannot survive or often struggle at best," he said this week. "Clearly our Rieslings, Gerwurz, some Pinot Noir, Chablis-style Chardonnays, occasional Cab Franc and Meunier can reach world-class recognition in parts of Michigan," Begin said. But, "The deep reds, Cabernet Sauvignon, Zins and Malbec generally need more heat to mature properly." And that's his goal -- to produce full-bodied reds.

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 winesite@detnews.com

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Chateau Chantal

This is a view of Chateau Chantal's new vineyard, still quite early in the growing season, in Mendoza, Argentina. This photo was shot two weeks ago in the desertlike region. Harvest occurs in March.

Begin, who just returned from Argentina two weeks ago, is excited about his farm, in sight of the Andes. The elevation is 2,700 feet above sea level, and his particular spot is not usually prone to frost -- or the other big threat in Mendoza, hail. Hail is such a threat, he said, that growers install special netting high over the trellises to protect the vines.

Begin says Chantal's winemaker, Mark Johnson, will oversee their first harvest, which is coming up in March. He will join a local winemaker and enologist in managing the picking and crush. He's expecting a huge harvest, enough fruit to produce some 44,000 cases of wine.

Begin, spurred by French winemaking brothers Jacque and Francois Lurton, who built a winery in Argentina, has spent the last four to five years exploring that country and Brazil for property. He was aided in this venture by one of his investors, Dr. J. Edson Pontes, head of the Urology

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Department at Wayne State University School of Medicine. Pontes, who was born in Brazil, speaks fluent Portuguese, along with many other languages, and his wife still lives in Brazil.

Begin makes the point he is not abandoning Michigan fruit. "We want to grow and make the best of Northern Michigan wine. Our six vineyards on Old Mission Peninsula attest to that capital and sweat ethic," he said. "But guess what? Everyone does not eat the same food ... and wine goes with food. Clearly the U.S. population is evolving into a multi-cultural society with varied and multiple foods and tastes." And that's the niche he's hoping to fill.

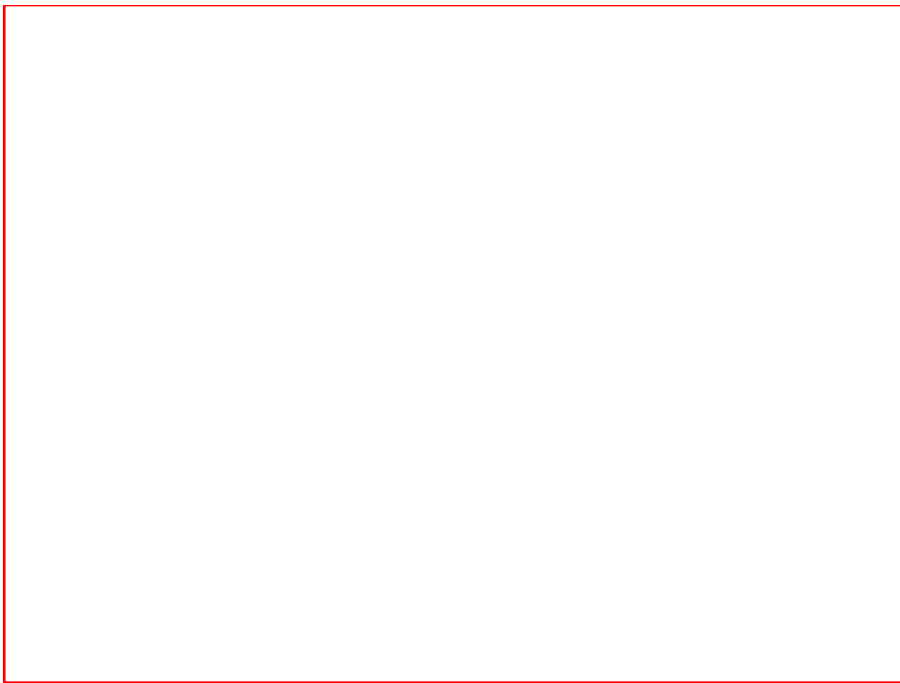
Working out the problem with a pencil

If you think running a winery is glamorous business, consider what happened recently at Ohio's Kinkead Ridge Vineyards, 60 miles east of Cincinnati in the historic town of Ripley on the Ohio River. Owners Ron Barrett and Nancy Bentley discovered a leak in a barrel AFTER it was filled with Cabernet Sauvignon from the 2004 harvest. Ron jammed a convenient pencil in the hole until he could patch it with hardwood. Nancy passed along this picture of the errant barrel.

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-- **November 25, 2004**

