

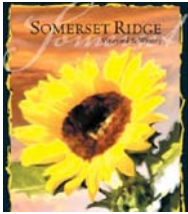
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WINE | The Jefferson Cup

ELIMINATING GRAPE-ISM

Prestigious KC competition works to end prejudice against non-California wines.

By LAUREN CHAPIN
The Kansas City Star



Mike Ransdell | The Kansas City Star

Wine consultant Robert Noecker of Overland Park was a judge at this year's Jefferson Cup wine competition that recognizes regional wines crafted from unfamiliar grape varieties.



file photo

Les and Michelle Meyer are the father-daughter duo behind Holy-Field Vineyard and Winery.



MIKE RANSDALL | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

"Wine is a living product, and we should be drinking locally," Dennis Reynolds says.



Mike Ransdell | The Kansas City Star

Colleen and Jason Gerke make Jowler Creek wine in their basement.

Like contestants at a beauty pageant waiting to go on stage, metal carts lined with stems and flutes of wine are queued up outside the courtyard of Café Sebastienne at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art.

It's just 9 a.m., but clinks and tinkles replace polite conversations as volunteers roll the carts into the room for the start of the 2006 Jefferson Cup Invitational Wine Competition.

Doug Frost, emcee and the competition's founder, ceremoniously calls out: "Let the wine come forth."

What comes forth are hundreds of wines from across the United States — and not just big-name California wines made from a handful of familiar grapes, the Chardonnays, Merlots and Cabernet Sauvignons.

Instead, an equal number of entries hail from states like Michigan, Virginia, New Mexico, Texas and, yes, Kansas and Missouri. Most of us have never heard of these wines, let alone the native grapes — referred to in winespeak as non-vinifera grapes — from which they are made, the Chambourcins, Nortons and Vignoles.

A Master of Wine, Master Sommelier and columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, Frost named the Jefferson Cup in honor of Thomas Jefferson. Among his many attributes, the third president was a strong promoter of American viticulture and the country's wine-growing abilities.

The goal of the competition is to eliminate "grape racism," the prejudice against other-than-California wines, Frost says. And although he has yet to win the war, he is winning battles. Thanks in part to the Jefferson Cup, which started in 1999, regional wines made from lesser-known grapes are winning critical acclaim and, ultimately, favor with wine drinkers.

Three local wineries were invited to this year's competition held in early December: Holy-Field Winery and Vineyards in Basehor, Kan., is a seven-year veteran and consistent winner; Miami County's Somerset Ridge Vineyard and Winery has participated for two years; and first-time invitee Jowler Creek Vineyard and Winery in Platte County is so new the wines aren't yet available in the retail market.

All the wines entered in the competition were evaluated by 13 veteran wine professionals, including a Master Sommelier from Napa Valley and a Master Sommelier and vineyard owner from Texas.

Volunteer Rich Bryan gingerly places five entries of Traminette, a non-vinifera similar to a Gewürztraminer, before a panel of four judges. They swirl and sniff, sip and spit while jotting down notes on judging sheets. Words like "rosewater," "breezy," "viscous" and "peaches" are used to describe the Traminettes from Michigan, Missouri and New York.

Over two days the judges taste more than 500 wines from 25 states. To prevent bias, no bottles are allowed in the tasting room; only the volunteers pouring and serving know whose wine is before the judges. Wines can be awarded a Certificate of Merit or an Example of American Greatness or become a Jefferson Cup nominee.

One Traminette receives no rating; one is awarded a Certificate of Merit and three receive an Example of American Greatness.

Unlike traditional competitions in which anyone can submit wines, the Jefferson Cup is invitation-only and includes categories for both vinifera and non-vinifera wines. This year 300 wineries were invited to submit wines. Frost calls on his many contacts in the wine industry to put together a Who's Who panel of judges. This year's panel included Bob Bath, Master of Wine from Napa, Calif.; Laura DePasquale, Master Sommelier from Miami; Bob Foster, a San Diego-based writer of the *California Grapevine*; and Master Sommelier Guy Stout from Texas. Local judges include industry veteran Robert Noecker, Joyce Angelos with Premier Cru wine distributorship and Jim Coley of Gomer's Midtown.

Many of the judges come back year after year, which lends consistency to the judging. "Some (of the judges) were frankly surprised at the ability of states far from the West Coast to offer wines of comparable or even superior quality. Because we have tried to use much the same group of judges, they are far less surprised by these successes in subsequent competitions," Frost says. "They have grown into an egalitarian attitude about wine. They're not hung up on any particular style and know that California is no more important than any other region."

Bob Bath, the Napa-based Master Sommelier, looks for "oh-my-gosh" wines, wines that make him sit back and nod approvingly. He has learned that great wines can come from anywhere, and he particularly appreciates the other-than-California wines.

"Where some of these people are growing grapes, they have the deck stacked against them — the weather, the soil. I applaud the people for even trying, let alone succeeding," Bath says.

All Jefferson Cup nominees are tasted against one another, and top wines in this category are named Jefferson Cup winners. There were 67 nominees in the final round of tasting: 19 were awarded a Jefferson Cup.

But the crowning achievement goes to wines given the Jefferson Trophy.

Only three wines tasted were awarded trophies unanimously. Two were viniferas: Virginia's White Hall Vineyards Petit Mansang 2005 and Napa Valley's Jade Mountain La Provencal 2004, a blend of Mourvedre, Syrah and Grenache.

The third winner?

A Missouri non-vinifera wine: Stone Hill Winery's Late Harvest Vignoles 2004.

Braving the elements

At Dennis Reynolds' Somerset Ridge winery in Miami County, Traminette rules.

The lawyer-turned-winemaker began planting vines in 1998 on nine acres of Kansas farm land. Two-thirds of his vines are non-vinifera, primarily Traminette, Chancellor, Chambourcin, Chardonal and Cynthiana, regional vines that can produce remarkable wines despite humidity, temperature fluctuations, drought, winds and

overall lousy growing conditions. He loves the acidity and structure of Traminette. The other third is vinifera vines: Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Chardonnay that can turn finicky in the Midwest's climate.

It's the wines made from those lesser-known grapes that gained Reynolds a coveted invite to the Jefferson Cup Invitational Wine Competition.

By design, Reynolds doesn't enter many competitions — "too time-consuming." But when Jefferson Cup founder Doug Frost contacted Reynolds, he did not hesitate: "We were thrilled."

Reynolds likes the premise of the competition, and he's happy to see consumers becoming more interested in local products — from apples to beef to wine.

"In Europe, wine is a regional product, and Americans had gotten away from that," he says. "Now we're recognizing that regional wines have regional tastes. Wine is a living product, and we should be drinking locally."

Most wines are shipped from elsewhere to the Midwest, Reynolds says. Improper handling during shipping has the potential to damage a wine and change the way it tastes.

Reynolds belongs to the Kansas Viticulture and Farm Winery Association and the Kansas Grape Growers and Winemakers Association.

"The Jefferson Cup helped validate what we're doing" with our wines and our winery, he says, and quiet those who said they were crazy to plant grapes and make wine in Kansas.

Three other Miami County wineries are in the works, including two more vineyards on Somerset Ridge.

2006 results:

•**Ruby Red 2004** (a Bordeaux blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Chancellor grapes): Certificate of Merit

•**Chardonee 2005**: Certificate of Merit

•**Ambrosia Late Harvest Traminette NV**: Certificate of Merit

Where to buy: Kansas retail outlets only, including Lukas Liquors, Rimann Liquors, Metcalf Discount and Gomer's. At the winery, 29725 Somerset Road, Somerset, Kan., (913) 491-0038; somersetridge.com. Winter hours: noon to 5 p.m. Friday through Sunday.

A decorated wine veteran

The wall of medals on display behind the counter in the tasting room at Holy-Field Vineyard and Winery in Basehor, Kan., prompted one customer to ask, "Who's the athlete?"

The colorful display of satin and metal recognizes the father-daughter winemaking team of Les and Michelle Meyer. Holy-Field is one of the oldest wineries in the region, and one of the most decorated. On the short list of most-coveted awards: the Jefferson Cup.

Since the winery was established in July 1994, the Meyers have been asked to participate in the national, invitation-only wine competition seven times. The pair has submitted about 25 wines to the Jefferson Cup, all made from grapes that may not be familiar to many wine drinkers — from Chardonee and Seyval Blanc to Norton to the late harvest Vignoles.

Seven of their wines were named "Great Wines"; four were voted Jefferson Cup nominees, and two have won a Jefferson Cup: Holy-Field's Cynthiana 2002 (in 2004) and Late Harvest Vignoles 2002 (in 2005).

"The judges who come to the Jefferson Cup have experience with regional wines. They know regional wines do not have the same varietal characteristics of vinifera wines, and they know growing conditions are different," Michelle Meyer says.

"If it's Concord, they know what to expect. If it's well-done, it's well-done. ... And if you make it well, it should win awards," she says. The prominence of the Jefferson Cup is rising in tandem with the increased interest in regional foods and wines. "2006 was by far our best year" for sales, Meyer says. "More and more, people simply appreciate good wine, especially if it comes from where they live."

2006 results:

•**Melody**: Certificate of Merit

•**Chardonee 2005**: Jefferson Cup nominee

•**Seyval Blanc 2005**: Certificate of Merit

•**Vignoles**: Example of American Greatness

•**Late Harvest Vignoles 2006**: Jefferson Cup nominee

•**Norton (Cynthiana) 2004**: Certificate of Merit

Where to buy: Kansas outlets only, including Lukas Liquors, Rimann Liquors in Lenexa, Stonebridge Fine Wines and K-7 Liquors.

At the winery, 18807 158th St., Basehor, Kan. (913) 724-9463. Hours: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday, 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday and noon to 6 p.m. Sunday.

New kids on the vine

Jason and Colleen Gerke are the proud new parents of liquid babies — a Norton, a Norton port, a Vignoles and a late-harvest Vignoles. Each bottle is sealed with baby blue wax and identified by a label adorned with a pencil sketch of a raccoon.

The Jowler Creek entries were the youngest wines from the newest vines at the Jefferson Cup. With 2-year-old vines, the wines aren't even on the market yet.

Married in 2002, the couple bought 16 acres near Camden Point just northeast of Platte City in October 2003. In spring 2004 they planted 250 vines of Norton in hand-dug holes. In spring 2005 they planted 250 more Norton and 600 Vignoles vines, this time with a retrofitted tobacco-setter.

Last spring they planted 1,900 more vines: 500 Norton, 500 Vignoles, 300 Cabernet Franc and 600 Traminette. But they plan to take this spring off because their first child is due in April.

Jason is a farm boy from central Missouri. Colleen is a native Californian, a surfer from Santa Barbara who took wine-making classes and now stashes her surfboard in their basement/tasting room. Their goal: to become a self-sustaining winery. Their mentors: Les and Michelle Meyer of Holy-Field Vineyard and Winery.

"We're never gonna compete with the huge guys (in the state); we want to stay on the boutique side," Jason says. "We want to make it our full-time job, to make a comfortable living working together. It's fun to have something to create and have control of through the whole process."

The Gerkes had heard of the Jefferson Cup, but they were surprised and excited when Doug Frost called the day before the competition asking them for three bottles each of their four wines.

"Just the fact that we were invited, for one thing, meant we were doing something right, making something someone will enjoy drinking," Jason says.

"It's nice to have an evaluation on where we are. It tells us we were starting out on a solid base. We can learn and try to improve from there."

2006 results:

- **Late Harvest Vignoles:** Certificate of Merit
- **Norton Port 2005:** Certificate of Merit
- **Vignoles 2005:** Certificate of Merit

Where to buy: jowlercreek.com.

Seven wines to try

- **Chardonel:** A hybrid out of New York state created from Chardonnay and Seyval Blanc, it has many of the characteristics of a traditional Chardonnay, although it's less buttery.
- **Melody:** Made from the grape of the same name, Melody has a light, floral nose and is best served as an aperitif.
- **Seyval Blanc:** A French-American white wine hybrid known for its acidity, it is refreshing and crisp.
- **Traminette:** A hardy relative of Gewürztraminer, Traminette is known for its tropical, spicy nose.
- **Vignoles:** A lovely white grape that can be crafted into two styles: Vignoles, which pairs well with spicy foods, like a Riesling, or as a Late Harvest Vignoles, a beautifully balanced dessert wine.
- **Chambourcin:** A red wine hybrid that makes a richly colored wine, Chambourcin reminds some of a great Merlot.
- **Norton:** Missouri's official grape, Norton is considered the most consistent performer among the indigenous red wine grapes.

Also known as Cynthiana, it is part of the Slow Food Ark of Taste. This grape makes robust wines with lovely tannins. Think Zinfandel.

To learn more about the Missouri Grape and Wine Program or Missouri wineries, log onto missouriwine.org. For information about Kansas wineries, log onto kansafarmwineries.org or kansasgrapesandwines.com.

The Jefferson Cup Invitational is a fundraiser for Angel Flight, a nonprofit organization that provides free flights to people who need to travel for specialized medical treatment or in response to disasters. This year the competition raised more than \$50,000 for the charity. For more information about Angel Flight, go to angelflightcentral.org.

@ To see additional photos of the Jefferson Cup wine competition, go to Kansascity.com and click on FYI/Living, then click on Food.

To reach Lauren Chapin, call (816) 234-4702 or send e-mail to lchapin@kcstar.com.
