

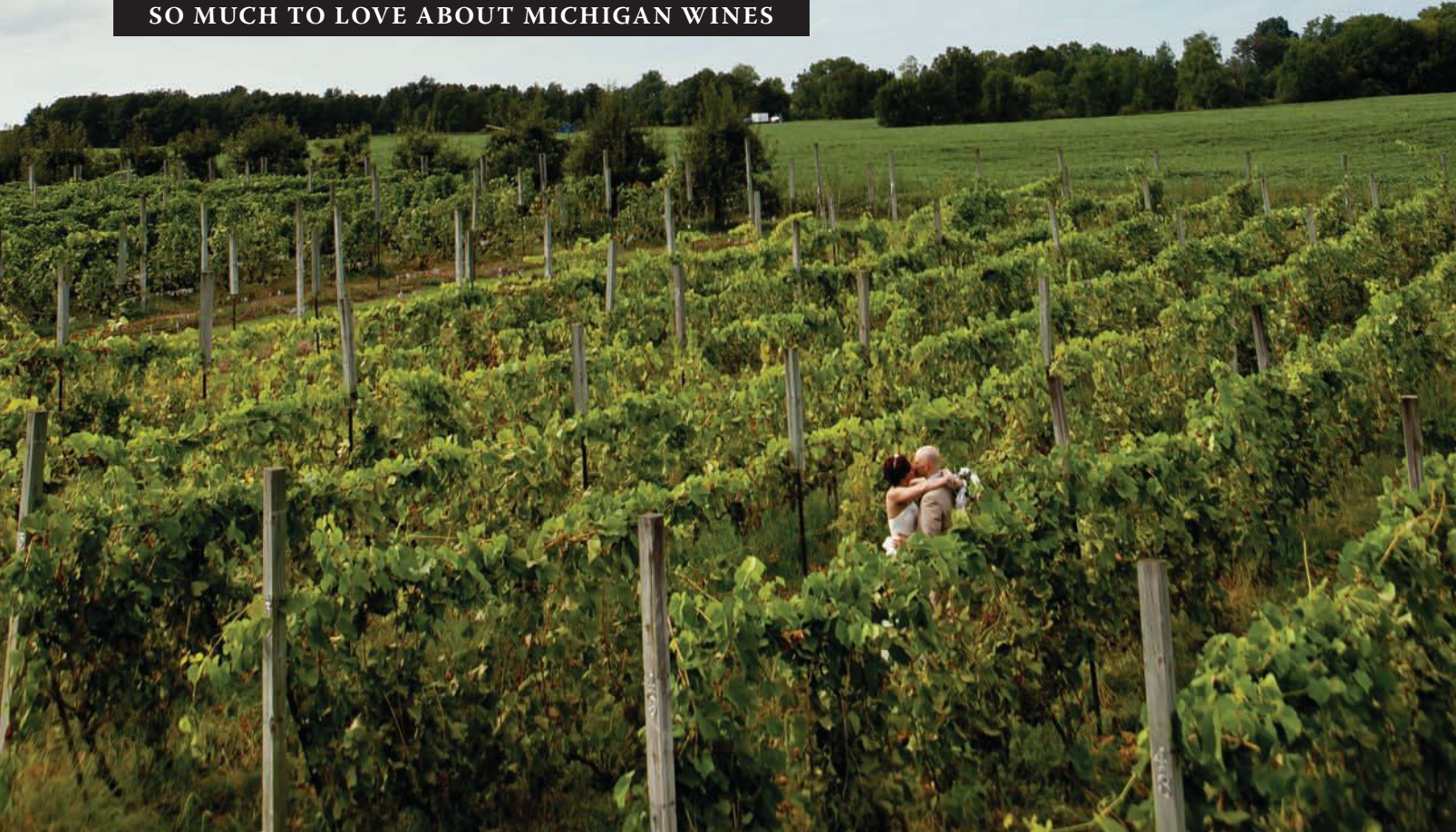
Michigan

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# A Michigan Pioneer: St. Julian Winery

FAMILY-OWNED COMPANY CONTINUES TO THRIVE, INCREASE PRODUCT LINE

/ By Michael Schafer

**ST. JULIAN WINERY IN PAW PAW IS THE OLDEST WINERY** in Michigan. Founded in 1936 by Mariano Meconi, an Italian immigrant by way of Windsor, Canada, St. Julian Winery is still family owned and operated by Meconi's grandson, David Braganini. The company now has four tasting room locations in addition to the winery.

From its beginnings as Border City Wine Cellars in Windsor, this stalwart of Michigan's wine industry has grown through innovation, entrepreneurship and serendipity. After a fire leveled his first winery in Windsor and Prohibition ended, Meconi moved across the river to Detroit. His Meconi Wine Company became only the fourth bonded winery in the state.

As Michiganders' thirst for wine grew, Meconi decided to move his operations closer to the source of his increasingly popular products. After relocating to Paw Paw in a location adjacent to the railroad, the winery was rechristened The Italian Wine Company. Business boomed as demand increased.

1938 brought the establishment of the Michigan Wine Institute (the predecessor of the Michigan Grape and Wine Industry Council). Its mission was to "further the development of the Michigan wine industry," as stated in a poster of the day. Meconi was named president of the new organization.

One of the company's most popular wines was named St. Julian in honor of San Giuliano, the patron saint of Faleria, Italy — Meconi's birthplace. During World War II, Meconi countered rising antifascist sentiment in the United States by changing the name of the company again, this time to St. Julian Winery.

Also in the 1940s, the Great Lakes State was one of the leading producers of grapes in the United States. After World War II ended in 1945, demand for sweet wines skyrocketed, in part because sugar was rationed during the war. The biggest sellers were sweet, fortified wines



Left, a La Salle wines production line; St. Julian acquired La Salle Wines and Champagnes of Farmington in 1970. Below, Mariano Meconi in the St. Julian cellars.



made from hybrid grapes like Niagara, Concord and Delaware.

As I-94 was constructed a stone's throw from St. Julian, the volume of visitors to the winery dramatically increased. Many were children of St. Julian's newest customers, inspiring Apollo "Paul" Braganini, Meconi's son-in-law, to begin producing "non-alcoholic champagne."

Meanwhile, the 1960s and '70s were revolutionary for American wines. Consumers wanted wines that were drier and made from specific varieties — radically different from what Americans had enjoyed since World War II.

1973 was a landmark year for St. Julian. That's when current President David Braganini started working in his family's business and the solera system for producing sherry was instituted. An unusual and time-consuming process, solera is based on each bottle being made with a blend of sherry wines from a series of vintages. Using the Niagara grape, St. Julian produced its first sherry in 1975 from sherry wines made over the previous two vintages.

St. Julian offers an extensive variety of other products including seven styles of non-alcoholic

sparkling juice and its recently introduced Gunga Din hard cider. Today, the company produces more than 36 products, David Braganini says.

"We now make brandy from Chardonnay, Pinot Gris and Vidal Blanc grapes," he says. "One of our newer offerings is vodka produced from 100 percent grape spirits. Our premium wines, the Braganini Reserve line, continue to win awards.

"Our goal is to really provide what our customers want."

**"Our goal is to really provide what our customers want."**

—David Braganini, grandson of  
St. Julian Winery founder  
Mariano Meconi

*Michael Schafer Esq., The Wine Counselor, is a Michigan-based educator, speaker, sommelier, writer and consultant.*