

The Kentucky Wine & Vine Fest

The basic ingredients of a fine wine are simple: grapes, yeast, and time. Whether the result is worthy of placement on an ordinary dinner table or in the lineup of a special celebration is up to what comes next – the blending of those ingredients. The basic elements of the Kentucky Wine and Vine Fest, a Kentucky agricultural event held for the first time in Nicholasville, Kentucky in the Spring of 2004, were almost as simple: agriculture, modern culture, and history, and like wine making itself, its eventual success was in the mix.

The Kentucky Wine and Vine festival experience was defined by that mix: a touch of haute cuisine, a dash of home grown, and a thorough splash of the unexpected. And that mix, that element of being “not exactly” what you’d expect from a gathering devoted to wine, is just what made the event one of the most charming festivals in the South – a land where festivals abound.

Carola Hartley, executive director of Nicholasville NOW!, a downtown revitalization organization that sponsored the festival, said that although the event was designed to celebrate wine in general, its specific emphasis was on the products of Kentucky’s wineries and vineyards. “We wanted to create a festival that celebrates life in Jessamine County,” Hartley said. “Grapes are not the largest agricultural crop here, but they are becoming more and more important.”

Hartley is right, according to Jessamine County Extension Agent Rob Amburgey, who said there are “at least 13 vineyards here now, and the number is growing.”

Vineyards aren’t exactly new to Jessamine County; the county is the site of the first commercial vineyard in the United States, established in 1798 after Jean Jacques DuFour, a native of Vevay Switzerland, chose a fertile, sloping site in a great bend of the Kentucky River and the southernmost tip of Jessamine County as the perfect site for growing grapes. In addition to producing wines worthy of placement in Thomas Jefferson’s wine cellar at Monticello, DuFour founded the Kentucky Vineyard Society, an organization that counted the great statesman Henry Clay among its shareholders.

However strong the Wine Fest’s historical ties are, its ties to modern tastes and trends are stronger. A booth dedicated to “The Original Kettle Corn,” a staple at any Kentucky festival, stood within whistling distance of the stage where experienced Chef Joseph Arvin whipped up delicacies such as Low Carb Key West Crab Cakes with Mustard Sauce and Shrimp Scampi – each with enough expertly added dashes of wine to make them soar above other, more ordinary festival palette pleasers.

Participants browsed Kentucky and International wine tents and tasted everything from A country style Sammontana “San Firenze,” a chianti with hints of blackberry, currants and allspice, to the lovely oak notes of Casanuava delle Cerbraie “Brunella di Montalcino DOCG,” a \$63 a bottle Toscana wine. In the background, the high-toned lead singer of Bottomline, a bluegrass band from Greenup, Kentucky, sang lyrics like “Honey, let me be your salty dog,” reminding listeners that that a festival doesn’t have to be high-fallutin’ to be high scale.

In fact, one of the festival’s most endearing qualities was its blend of those elements typically considered “high class” with what will



always be considered “home grown.” The International Wine Tent stood just a few steps away from a tent devoted to Kentucky wines and vineyards. Products of Kentucky vineyards and wineries such as Jessamine County’s Chrisman Mill Winery and Vineyards were given just as much attention, if not more, as the exotic offerings of WineSelect of Kentucky, a company that imports and distributes primarily Italian wines. Other Kentucky wineries and vineyards at the festival included Rolling Hills (Springfield), Bravard Wines (Hopkinsville), and Castle Hill Farm (Versailles).

WineSelect representative Livea Theoli was among many who were pleasantly surprised by the Kentucky Wine and Vine Fest experience. WineSelect’s owner Mike Cappy typically carries wines from very small vineyards with small yields, “boutique vineyards,” according to Theoli, and has been the first to introduce these wines to the U.S. in general and Kentucky in particular. Because the wines aren’t well known, Theoli said it’s often necessary to provide background information during tastings and other public events.

“Since Nicholasville isn’t a large metropolis, I didn’t expect the percentage of people who did know their international wines, who knew what they were drinking, and who went through the tasting process the way they’re supposed to,” she said.

The wine connoisseurs who decided to chance a beautiful May afternoon on a “first annual” festival mingled easily among those who came because the thought of a festival – any festival -- was always a good thought. “We already have a large number of people in the area who are interested in wines and wine making, but it’s always a pleasure to introduce the pure joy of wine appreciation to a novice,” Denise Nelson, who co-owns and operates Chrisman Mill Winery and Vineyards



in Jessamine County with her husband, Chris, said. “Newcomers bring such a wonderful curiosity and interest to our work, and they usually want to learn everything they can about the process.”

Chrisman Mill offerings such as their First Vineyard Reserve, a dry red made from a blend of Kentucky grown Chambourcin and Cabernet Franc, and Vidal Blanc, an off-dry white wine with a floral fruity bouquet and the refined Riesling like flavors of ripe pears, were popular choices among festival participants, according to Nelson.

DuFour and the Kentucky Vineyard Society aside, this part of the country has a great tradition of wines and wine appreciation, said Chris Nelson. “We have an agrarian culture here that lends itself to working the land and getting product from it. Although the weather here creates a harsher growing environment than out west, land here is more reasonable, and there’s a built in pioneering spirit built in with those harsher conditions.” As a result, Kentucky wines have grown increasingly popular in recent years, he added.

Still, it will be a while before wineries and vineyards – and even wine festivals – are as popular in Kentucky as they are in western states such as California. For example, customers of the annual Napa Valley wine auction, a posh California event that raised dollars numbering in the millions this year, would have been thrilled at the great bargains to be had at the Kentucky Wine and Vine Fest’s auction, where cowboy auctioneer Mike Gooch of Gooch and Company reigned supreme.

When not enjoying the auction, wine tents, arts and crafts and other vendors along with several “Cooking with Wine” demonstrations, festival-goers who had heeded the “bring your own lawn chair” rule of small town events could sit comfortably and listen to the festival’s day-long entertainment lineup that mixed bluegrass with jazz and rhythm and blues.

Hartley’s plan – to take a few key ingredients and “mix them up” to create a “celebration of life in Nicholasville and Jessamine County” – worked, and she’s already looking forward to next year’s festival, already scheduled for Saturday, May 14, 2005.

“We’re not going to fix something that’s not broken, but want to make a few additions next year. We’re looking at adding a gourmet coffee tent and expanding on the food end. We’ll invite more chefs next year, and we’ll have more events centered around using wine in recipes. Another important addition will be having someone here that can discuss the grape industry and the importance of grapes as an agricultural crop in this state.”

According to Hartley, next year’s festival might be “bigger and better,” but it definitely won’t lose its mix of what you’d expect and what you might not expect -- its blend of old and new, gourmet and just plain good food, and most of all, fancy, footloose and carefree. “That’s where the fun comes in,” Hartley said, “and what good is a festival without the fun?”

