



Cultivating a Wine Lover's Paradise

Maryland may not be the first place that comes to mind when thinking of great wine-producing regions, but that's changing soon if Dr. Joseph Fiola, Extension viticulture (grape production) and small fruit specialist at the Western Maryland Research and Education Center (WMREC), has anything to say about it.

Currently, Maryland has twelve active wineries, with three more—including one on the Eastern Shore—in the work. The wineries are spread across the state in Baltimore, Carroll, Frederick, Garrett, and Harford counties.

"Maryland is at a great advantage when it comes to wine producing," says an enthusiastic Fiola. "The Piedmont region of Maryland (which includes Baltimore, Carroll, Harford, and Washington counties) is similar in climate to the best wine-producing region in Virginia. In addition, Southern Maryland and the Eastern Shore have the advantages of long growing season with little risk of winter damage."

Fiola is conducting research at the college's research and education centers to determine what types of grapes grow best in different parts of the state. "The secret to successful wine production is finding the variety best adapted to the region," he explains.

Fiola also is working with Extension educators R. David Myers, Benjamin Beale, and Herb Reed on another project, funded by the Southern Maryland Tri-County

Council (consisting of Calvert, Charles, and St. Mary's counties). The team is examining if viticulture can be an alternative to tobacco farm in the area.

But Fiola's work involves more than research. As viticulture specialist, he is helping wine producers improve and market their products. He initiated and oversees the Maryland Quality Wine Alliance (MDQWA), which sets the minimum standard for Maryland commercial wines. Alliance panel members include technical wine makers, viticulture specialists, and consumers. Wineries submit wines that are poured blind. Panelists determine if the wines are of commercial quality and free of flaws, such as vinegar or sulfur aromas, and make suggestions for improvement. The primary focus of MDQWA, says Fiola "is to eliminate the few bad wines."

Maryland vintners produce nationally and internationally acclaimed wines, but there's still the perception that Maryland wines are subpar. According to Fiola, Maryland's biggest obstacle is its reputation. Part of the problem has been the lack of resources provided by the state. "We're the only state in the region that doesn't have an annual allotment of money coming from the state for marketing our wines or funding research," Fiola explains. The exception is a one-time \$50,000 grant from the Maryland Department of Agriculture for the Ask for Maryland Wine campaign. The campaign is designed to increase awareness of Maryland wine.

An awareness is growing, as is interest in becoming a vintner. "There's a great interest in wine producing in Maryland," says Fiola. About 200 people have attended beginning growers' workshops he has held over the past two years and about 20 to 30 new acres are being planted in 2003. These new producers will become a part of a thriving network. "People in the Maryland wine industry are great," Fiola says with a smile "They're appreciative of our work for them and really cooperate with each other. I love working with them."

Maryland's greatest strength in wine producing, according to Fiola, is its varied climate that allows a wide variety of grapes to be grown. "In California they produce mostly dry wines but in Maryland you can find just about any type of wine you want, from fine Bordeaux-type wines to sweet wines to fruit wines," he explains. "The diversity is exciting. There's great potential in Maryland and we're primed to take our first big steps."



-Marika Carley