

2 fun new places to try Minnesota wines: A vineyard and a wine bar

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7 Vines Vineyard in Dellwood is wine country incarnate, while UnWined Up North in Grand Rapids pours more than 30 locally produced wines.

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A new winery and a new truly local wine bar are sure signs that Minnesota's fermented-grape-juice scene is hopping.

Minnesota vineyard, global expertise

I spent a blissful Sunday afternoon at the 7 Vines Vineyard (101 E. Hwy. 96, Dellwood, 7vinesvineyard.com, 651-478-6300), on the north side of White Bear Lake. The vineyards and grounds are wine country incarnate, with slopes of vine-loving sandy loam. The cellar is packed with cutting-edge equipment.

So it's little wonder that the wines are among the best I've tasted in Minnesota. There's some deftly made stuff sourced from the West Coast (riesling, chardonnay, cabernet), but for me the eureka wines emanate from two cold-climate grapes, Marquette and Frontenac blanc.

The latter is actually a mutation of two University of Minnesota grapes, Frontenac and Frontenac gris, and along with the recently released Itasca, portends very good times ahead for white grapes in these parts. At 7 Vines, a terrific sparkling wine, Cuvée du Peltier, is made with 100% Frontenac blanc grapes. And the still Frontenac blanc is a knockout wine, clean, crisp and seriously delicious.

The winery also makes two versions of Marquette, the U's most promising red grape. I was particularly enamored of the whole-cluster rendition, with a gorgeous nose and spot-on fruit/tannin/acidity harmony showcasing black fruit and black pepper. The "regular" Marquette gets 25% new French oak and also is nicely integrated.



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The cozy bar serves food and wine, some made from cold-climate grapes.

Minnesota native Bryan Forbes worked at wineries on three continents and clearly gleaned some major expertise along the way, and Maureen McKenna is the recently promoted assistant winemaker.

The forces behind the operation are Ron and Arlie Peltier, who fell in love with the property, part of a James J. Hill estate, three-plus decades ago and waited patiently until it became available in 2010. The winery's name came naturally: Ron wore number 7 as a hockey player at the U under Herb Brooks, and the Peltiers have seven grandchildren, who are commemorated on the foil atop the bottles.

Peltier has taken a "slow and steady wins the race" approach, planting a couple of acres each year and opening to the public in 2017. The warm and cozy wine bar, which serves flatbreads, sandwiches, soups and more, is augmented by an array of outdoor seating.

It's absolutely worth the drive and would make a dandy "double dip" with another of Minnesota's best wineries, St. Croix Vineyards (6428 Manning Av., Stillwater, scwwines.com, 651-430-3310). At the very least, pop into nearby Pine Tree Apple Orchard (450 Apple Orchard Road, White Bear Lake, pinetreeappleorchard.com, 651-429-7202) for, among other

delicious delights, the kind of apple pie that Grandma used to make (if you had a blessed childhood).

Locavore wine bar

A couple hundred miles to the north, another couple with a vinous vision have seen it come to fruition. In mid-June, Lars and Tia Starks opened UnWined Up North (304 N. Pokegama Av., Grand Rapids, Minn., winebargrandrapidsmn.com, 1-218-999-9234), where the wine list (plus beer and cider) is all Minnesota, all the time.

They're pouring more than 30 locally produced juice from four wineries — Carlos Creek, Forestedge, Millner Heritage and Cannon River — and beginning in August will add a Minnesota "Winery of the Month" to the offerings.

"We have been busier than we expected," Lars Starks said. "I often hear 'Thank you for doing this. We really needed a place like this.' We feel very fortunate."

UnWined Up North is open from 11 a.m. until 9 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays. And this being Minnesota, there is patio seating throughout the summer.

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