

# **OHIO WINE COUNTRY EXCURSIONS**



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**UPDATED EDITION**

**Patricia Latimer**



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Photo facing title page: White grapes on the vine at The Winery at Wolf Creek. ©  
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# Preface



This book is dedicated to the men and women in my family who over three generations sought adventure and opportunity as they journeyed across the United States. It is a story of chance and choice from Connecticut to Ohio and on across the plains and mountains to their destination, California. They passionately pursued their dreams, and were challenged by the lure of California to live them, but ultimately were called home to Ohio to replenish them.

The record of this historic adventure began in Harrisburg, Iowa, March 2, 1850, as seven men and my great-grandfather, Leonard Straight, started west by horse and wagon, traveling for more than one hundred days through hardship and struggle to give reality to their dream of finding gold in the Sierra Nevada. Returning to Ohio with pockets of plenty, my great-grandfather purchased a farm, to serve both his avocation and vocation, in northern Ohio for his wife and eight children.

But the dream did not die. In the early twentieth century, my grandmother, Lenore Straight Latimer, the youngest daughter of Leonard Straight, headed west, and she and her physician husband settled in Pomona,

California, in 1918. During the height of the Spanish flu pandemic, while trying to save his patients, the young doctor became ill and suddenly died. This time California offered no gold. The young wife was left a widow with a son of ten. Her anguished letters are witness to her decision to return to Ohio, where a large family would help her.

Her son, Vernon Straight Latimer, grew up in Cleveland and attended Case Western Reserve and then Harvard Business School, yet he remembered his California childhood amongst the orange groves and olive orchards. Stories of the 1920s inspired me, Vernon's youngest daughter, to make a mid-twentieth-century trip to California after college. For several decades I remained in San Francisco, where I became a writer and author on California wine, then later an entrepreneur, representing the wineries of Napa, Sonoma, and Mendocino, each with its own thrilling story.

By the late 1990s, my life took a dramatic turn when my father became ill. I found myself traveling back and forth between California and Ohio. In Ohio I reacquainted myself with my family's heritage and my own interest in



A vineyard at dawn. *Courtesy OSU/OARDC*

viticulture. I brought with me the gift of inquiry, interviewing people and penning Ohio's untold wine story.

Thus, three generations later, influenced by my extraordinary California wine experience, there is new hope in the

Buckeye State to share the vision of Ohio families, past and present, who believe in an Ohio wine empire. This book is dedicated to those in my family who came before and encouraged me to pursue my dreams in my two favorite places.

# Foreword

Arnie Esterer



Welcome to Ohio, with all its wines and the people who make them.

Historically, Ohio ranks as a great wine state, and this book covers both the wonderful early story and the amazing rebirth by the current generation.

You will enjoy details that cover the Buckeye State's two major winegrowing regions, Lake Erie and the Ohio River Valley, and interesting people and wineries in between. Like the world wine business, the Ohio industry grows from family interests and their long-term views. As winery owners happily pour their vintages, they share their personal winemaking philosophies and cultural heritage. By touring Ohio with this book, you will discover the wine heartland and the colorful families and members who built it.

Today, I believe wine to be a food, both healthy and nutritious, the beverage of moderation, to be consumed with meals but not to be misused. This tradition goes back ages to when bread and wine were staples used as offerings, and later became sacraments.

"Americans should drink the best wines!" Dr. Konstantin Frank said, and he demonstrated how to grow wine

grapes to make the most of each vintage in the Finger Lakes region in upstate New York. Winegrowing at Markko Vineyard, in Conneaut, adapted his practice to Ohio's Lake Erie. Now his influence shows that wines from Lake Erie grapes can complement the daily meals we share at home and when dining out as well as any.

Remember, every wine differs by vintage, winery, and bottling. No two wines are the same. Each wine has its own personality, just like people, and changes occur with age—some better than others.

Let this book be your guide as you find, meet, and follow these Ohio wines each year. As you buy, drink, and then grow to understand and appreciate each wine, you can share your feelings. Your feedback gives growers and winemakers important guidance on which direction to take. And by doing this, you shape Ohio wines; it becomes your own region.

What an exciting experience! Just enjoy the fun of discovering the beauty of these heartland wines and the human hands that make them.

Gladden your heart. Cheers to the wines, the dreams, and the memories!



Elegant bunches of blue grapes on trellised vines. *Photo by John Waraksa, Sapphire Falls Web design*  
*Courtesy Harpersfield Vineyard*



# Introduction



The diversity of Ohio's landscape invites guests, visitors, residents, and tourists to explore its beautiful grape vineyards, appellation by appellation and viticultural district by viticultural district.

As you drive along the south shore of Lake Erie, the lake serves as a spectacular backdrop for acres of gently rolling green vineyards. Its cerulean-blue waters share 262 miles of northern Ohio's border, all the way from the port at Conneaut past Cleveland and Sandusky Bay to Toledo and the Maumee estuary.

The Lake Erie Plains, a fertile swath of land, are part of the Great Lakes Plains, which sweep southward from Lake Erie into Ohio. Farther inland, the fertile farmlands of the dramatic, rolling Central Plains and the sweeping corn belt are intermittently dotted with lush vineyards. The Allegheny Plateau to the east, which merges with the hills and valleys of the Appalachian Mountains, is planted to vines and descends to the Bluegrass along the winding waters of the Ohio River Valley, home to more breathtaking vineyards.

Whenever you visit the Ohio wine country, there is a chance to observe

the cycle of life in the vineyards. In the spring, the sleeping vines burst with buds; in the summer, the vines form branches of leafy green; in the fall, the celadon and purple clusters glisten amid the burgundy and gold vineyards; and in the winter, the dormant, darkened, earthy vines rest. Then the cycle repeats itself.

Early on, the Ohio River Valley attracted the paleo-Indians: the Archaic, the Woodland, and the Hopewell. Although they were followed later by the Shawnee, the Miami, the Wyandot, and others, it was the arrival in 1788 of early settlers who had fought in the Revolutionary War and were given land for their service that stimulated the rush to settle Ohio and promote its agriculture.

Traveling by flatboat down the Ohio River, or by horse and wagon over the Appalachian Mountains, these eager young pioneers were determined to build settlements. This led to their planting small crops—fruits, vegetables, orchards, and vineyards. The determination and experimentation by one Nicholas Longworth, a prominent lawyer and horticulturist, in 1813 in and around Cincinnati laid the foundation



Young grapes. *Courtesy OSU/OARDC*

for experimental grape trials, resulting in the making of champagne and still wine from the Catawba grape.

During the heyday of wine in Ohio during the 1850s, Cincinnati and its environs were the center of American wine production. By the late 1860s, powdery mildew and black rot devastated the vineyards. The wine industry moved from the Ohio River Valley in the south to the shores of Lake Erie around Sandusky and the Erie Islands.

This region gained prominence in 1869, and it became Ohio's new grape-growing and wine-producing capital. By the early 1900s, the largest wineries in the Lake Erie Island region were situated there. The eastern grape belt, of which this was a part, started by migrations of Germans, French, Italians,

Czechs, Hungarians, Slovenians, and Shakers, extended from Sandusky to Conneaut and into Pennsylvania and western New York. From 1920 to 1933, Prohibition closed many wineries and vineyards. Wineries that produced sacramental wines and vineyards making nonalcoholic grape-based products were the exception. The sixties wine revolution in California inspired viticulturists to experiment with *vinifera*, *labrusca*, and hybrids and vintners to practice better winemaking in Ohio.

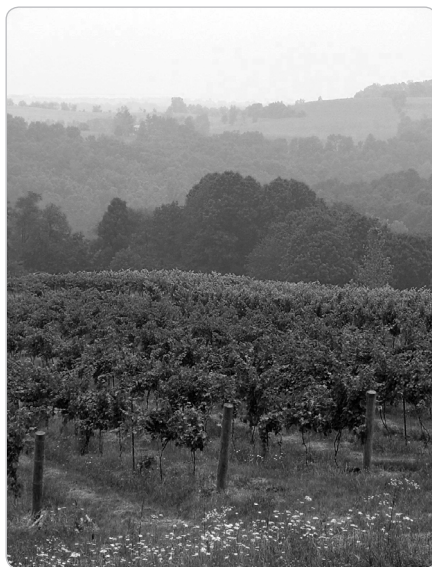
Today, the ribbon of towns, villages, and cities that crisscrosses the Buckeye State has defined its wine country. Just off of I-90 along Lake Erie, there are wineries and vineyards that appeal to wine aficionados, families, friends, and neighbors from around the



globe. They range across the Lake Erie Plains around Bryan, Toledo, Sandusky, Port Clinton, Kelleys Island, Put-in-Bay, Oregon, Avon Lake, Cleveland, Madison, Geneva, Ashtabula, and to Conneaut. These communities generate a lifestyle-workstyle for their citizenry and provide their patrons with lodging, fine dining, wine tasting, recreation, and relaxation.

As wine lovers travel any of the three north-south corridors, I-75, I-71, or I-77, they pass through some of the most gorgeous farm country in America, the heart of Amish Country, where horse and buggies are de rigueur and huge barns, tall silos, well-manicured crops, and herds of cattle catch the imagination. Here the wineries and vineyards are tucked among hills and valleys or grace the flat plains in towns like Versailles, Dover, Newcomerstown, Coshocton, Aurora, Valley City, West Lafayette, Wooster, Kent, Navarre, and Norton. Farther to the southwest, wine towns include Manchester, Ripley, Bethel, Cincinnati, Morrow, and Silverton.

Proprietors of these wineries encourage the public to stop by and experience the Ohio wine country. Some seventy to eighty-plus wineries—sometimes occupying elegant chateaus, old castles, threshing barns, bank barns, modern wonders, or humble cottages—are located on hilltops or in valleys alongside lakes, rivers, and streams. The



Flint Ridge Vineyards. Courtesy Carl Jahnes, owner of Flint Ridge Vineyards

public can taste and compare some of the most eclectic wines in the world, whether from estate-grown vineyards or farm wineries. Ohio is on the rise as a major player in the American wine industry!

Everywhere, there are restaurants, bistros, and delis for romantic picnics or family outings. Clubs, resorts, hotels, lodges, and bed and breakfasts make for inviting accommodations. Throughout this book, a quick guide included with each winery profile details contact information, owners, directions, hours, tours, events, winemaking procedures, best wines, and nearby places to visit. To all who explore the pages of this wine book, here is an invitation to join us in an Ohio wine country adventure!



*Courtesy Cincinnati Museum Center, Cincinnati Historical Society Library*

# First of the Ohio River Valley Visionaries



What we know as Ohio was once a vast unexplored region. Prior to the 1780s, except for traveling Indian tribes, Ohio was a wilderness of forests, rivers, fertile deltas, grasslands, rolling hills, and beautiful valleys.

In 1787, the United States Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance, which encouraged the settlement of the lands between the Allegheny Mountains and the Mississippi River. By 1788, John Cleves Symmes had been granted a charter to develop the Miami Purchase, a tract between the Great Miami and Little Miami rivers. In November of that year, Benjamin Stites and a party of twenty-six settled Columbia, just west of the Little Miami River's mouth. By December, Colonel Robert Patterson, along with eleven families and twenty-four men, colonized the 747-acre site called Losantiville opposite the Licking River. But it was Arthur St. Clair, the first governor of the Northwest Territory, who renamed it Cincinnati.

Ohio's penetration by larger numbers of settlers increased when participants of the Revolutionary War were given land as payment for their services. Rivers provided cheap and relatively easy means of transportation. Cincinnati grew rapidly, settled by

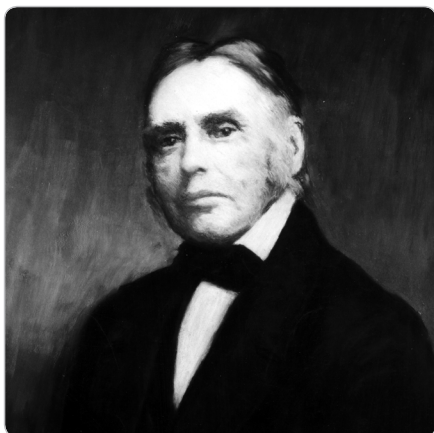
people who arrived by flatboat or overland by horse and cart.

The southern hillsides along the Ohio River were used for experimental vineyards and grape trials. Swiss-born Jean Jacques Defour, a viticulturist, had read about the possibilities of grape growing in the United States given its geography, climate, soil, and native varieties. Upon his arrival in America, he embarked on a campaign to educate Americans about the benefits of viticulture. In 1799, Defour established the Kentucky Wine Company, which at first failed due to vineyard disease and reduced yields.

When Defour visited Washington, D.C., he made a proclamation to the United States Congress that one day the Ohio River would rival the Rhine River for growing outstanding vines. Many representatives were dubious. In 1802, Defour's luck changed, and he successfully planted grapes on a land grant along the Ohio River.

In 1804, the dashing Nicholas Longworth departed Newark, New Jersey, and arrived in Cincinnati, the shining hillside city, where the realization of one's dreams often led to great fortune. Though a gifted lawyer, he preferred horticulture, especially grape





Nicholas Longworth. Courtesy Cincinnati Museum Center, Cincinnati Historical Society Library

growing, which led to his wealth and ability to support his passion.

From 1813 onward, Longworth tested the best varietals suitable for the Ohio River Valley. The cumulative effect of the fertile limestone soils, the modified continental climate, and the gently rolling topography were ideal for quality grapes and intensely flavored wines. He just had to find the right match. A four-acre vineyard planted to Cape and Alexander resulted in the production of a good white wine. Longworth's cellar yielded a Madeira copycat, which he fortified with brandy and sugar to make it more palatable. He planted European varieties by type, variety, and species for the next three decades. He persevered until the late 1840s, ever hopeful that his *vitis vinifera* would one day thrive in the Ohio River Valley.

Vintage after vintage, Longworth cultivated new native American

varieties, shipped by friendly viticulturists from across the states. But it wasn't until 1825 that John Adlum, a wine patriarch, gave Longworth a gift of Catawba grape cuttings. Mistakenly identified as Hungarian Tokay, the Catawba, which grew wild near Asheville, was named for the Catawba River, which flows from the mountains of the Carolinas. Adlum gained national fame for his discovery that the native Catawba made good wine, which he simultaneously publicized in his *Memoir on the Cultivation of the Vine in America and the Best Mode of Making Wine*.

Longworth wrote in the *Horticulturist*, "Major Adlum had a proper appreciation of the value of the Catawba grape. In a letter to me he remarked: 'In bringing this grape into public notice, I have rendered my country a greater service than I would have done, had I paid off the national debt.' I concur in this opinion."

Classified as *vitis labrusca*, the Catawba reflected nuances of classic *vitis vinifera*. A coveted 150-year-old eastern variety, the grape had bold-textured, dark-green foliage with flowers that self-fertilized. Its purplish-red medium-sized berries produced a clean, austere wine with an aroma of spice and a distinctive flavor. This fast-growing climber survived both heat and cold and loved the sun. Grown throughout the United States, the Catawba flourished best along the Ohio River, southern

Lake Erie, and in the Finger Lakes. It was originally used for making sparkling wine, still wine, and grape juice.

Longworth mapped out a business plan for the establishment of Longworth's Wine House and Vineyards. He planted the best native American varieties, from which he produced a substantial dry table wine. His investments placed Cincinnati and the Ohio River Valley as the center of the American wine industry. Skilled German immigrants who produced his Rhine-style wines added taste and cachet to the mix.

Beginning in the 1830s Cincinnati and the agricultural lands along the Ohio River became famous as the home of America's first commercial vineyards. The viticultural district was later dubbed "Rhineland of America." During this time, Longworth was a reputable 3,000-gallon premium producer, winning prizes for his Catawba. The Ohio wine boom took place after 1842, when Longworth accidentally produced a terrific sparkling Catawba. Convinced of the potential of this style of wine, he hired a French champagne-maker in the late 1840s to produce pure, natural sparkling Catawba in quantity to market outside of Cincinnati.

By 1848, Longworth had designed a 60,000-bottle cellar for the production of classic methode champenoise sparkling Catawba. After completion of the first fermentation, a dose of sugar was

added to the wine. A second fermentation was completed in the bottle; the sediment was cleared by riddling, the process of turning the bottles stored in racks by hand. In 1851, Longworth built a second 75,000-bottle cellar and hired a second French champagne-maker from Rheims. Sparkling Catawba became a rising star on the national wine scene, and Longworth's Wine House and Vineyards prospered.

A promoter, Longworth curried favor with the press by sending a letter and a wine sample. He also entered his Catawba in state, national, and international competitions. Longworth presented wine to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, America's most noted nineteenth-century poet, and in return he received a poem, "Ode to Catawba Wine."

While Longworth was revered as an American wine industry leader and Cincinnati wine entrepreneur, other commercial growers quickly followed in his footsteps. Prominent names included Robert Buchanan, C. W. Elliott, A. H. Ernest, John Motier, Stephen Mosher, Louis Rehfuss, William Resor, and John A. Warder. Other Catawba vineyards flourished in Hamilton, Brown, and Clermont counties, as did vineyards along the Ohio River in Kentucky and Indiana. Soon, there were some three hundred established vineyards in southwest Ohio.

As had Longworth, the proprietors of Cincinnati's wine houses employed

## **Ode to Catawba Wine**

*by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*

This song of mine  
Is a song of the vine  
To be sung by the glowing embers  
Of wayside inns,  
When rain begins  
To darken the drear Novembers.

It is not a song  
Of the Scuppernong,  
From warm Carolinian valleys,  
Nor the Isabel  
And the Muscadel  
That bask in our garden alleys.

Nor the red Mustang,  
Whose clusters hang  
O'er the waves of the Colorado,  
And the fiery flood  
Of whose purple blood  
Has a dash of Spanish bravado.

For richest and best  
Is the wine of the West,  
That grows by the Beautiful River,  
Whose sweet perfume  
Fills all the room  
With a benison on the giver.

And as hollow as trees  
Are the haunts of the bees,  
Forever going and coming,  
So the crystal hive  
Is all alive  
With a swarming and buzzing and  
humming.

Very good in its way  
Is the Verzenay  
Or the Sillery soft and creamy;  
But Catawba wine  
Has a taste more divine,  
More dulcet, delicious and dreamy.

There grows no vine  
By the haunted Rhine,  
By Danube or Guadalquivir,  
Nor on island or cape,  
That bears such a grape  
As grows by the Beautiful River.

Drugged is their juice  
For foreign use,  
When shipped o'er the reeling Atlantic,  
To rack our brains  
With fever pains,  
That have driven the Old World Frantic.

To the sewers and sinks  
With all such drinks,  
And after them tumble the mixer,  
For poison malign  
Is such Borgia wine,  
Or at best but a Devil's elixir.

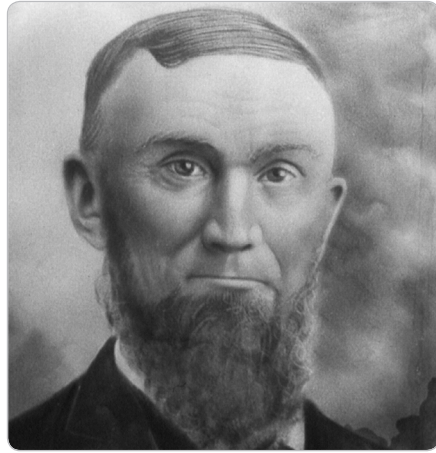
While pure as spring  
Is the wine I sing,  
And to praise it, one needs but name it;  
For Catawba wine  
Has need of no sign,  
No tavern bush to proclaim it.

And this Song of the Vine,  
This greeting of mine,  
The winds and the birds shall deliver  
To the Queen of the West,  
In her garlands dressed,  
On the banks of the Beautiful River.

German workers. Though for each vintage they cultivated the grapes and made the wine, there was no consistent standard for quality. The national demand for Catawba coerced large owners to upgrade production, distribution, and storage. Smaller wine operations fell by the wayside. Advocates of natural wine typically harvested and sorted the grapes by hand. The clusters were destemmed, crushed, and fermented naturally without sugar. If the sugar level was acceptable, the fermentation was completed. Early on, if the sugar level was unacceptable, vintners were permitted to add sugar to complete the fermentation.

The 1850s were the heyday of Ohio wine. One of the first organizations of its kind, the American Wine Growers Association of Cincinnati published viticultural information and promoted natural wine. As America's leading wine center, Cincinnati produced 245,000 bottles of sparkling wine (at \$1.50 a piece) and 205,000 bottles of still wine (at 40 cents a piece), valued at around \$400,000.

The Ohio River Valley growers and vintners were buoyed by the prospect of healthy vineyards and huge profits. John Michael Meier came from the vineyards of Bavaria in 1856 and established a 164-acre homestead and vineyard in Kenwood, which he planted to German rootstock that failed. His son John Conrad Meier sought advice from



John Michael Meier. *Courtesy Meier's Wine Cellars*

Nicholas Longworth and replaced their German varieties with Catawba. This decision influenced winegrowing and wine-making at Meier's Wine Cellars for more than 140 years.

The greater Cincinnati wine community became alarmed, however, by the rise and fall of black rot (reddish-brown circular to angular spots) and powdery mildew (small grayish-white patches) which attacked the vine and the fruit. Black rot was often mistakenly attributed to soil, climate, cultivation, or other factors. The native American powdery mildew, on the other hand, had ravaged vineyards in Europe before it wiped out ones in Ohio, so growers recognized the problem. These intruders reduced vine growth, yield, fruit, quality, and winter hardiness. At the end of the 1860s, grape growing had diminished in the Ohio River Valley, and the Catawba no longer reigned as king.