

North America is home to more species of grape vines than any other continent in the world, but the first European settlers found it impossible to establish vineyards using European grape varieties. This was caused by a variety of vine diseases in North America to which the European varieties had never been exposed. The native grapes were tried but proved to be too high in acid, too low in sugar and had a distinctive, unfamiliar taste. For over two hundred years, new pioneers to the Eastern United States tried cultivating the European grape varieties with no success.

When John James Dufour, a Swiss immigrant fleeing Napoleon's armies, set foot in America in 1796, there was no American wine industry. He had been sent by his family to scout the best possible place to start a Swiss colony devoted to wine making. He traveled through the Mid Atlantic states and found nothing that represented a successful vineyard. He then crossed the Appalachian Mountains, descended the Ohio River and eventually settled near Lexington, Kentucky where he founded a vineyard funded by the sale of shares to the wealthy citizens of that city.

Dufour planted the vineyard in 1799 with mostly European varieties. The vines grew well for a couple of years, but soon failed, following the same path of decline that others had witnessed over the past two centuries. Despite the failure, he noticed that one variety, the Cape, seemed to do better than all the others. When the investors lost interest, Dufour sought out a new sight for the Swiss colony that was on its way from Europe. He purchased land in the newly surveyed Indiana Territory north of the Ohio River. He took cuttings of the Cape grape to plant at the new site that would later become Vevay, Indiana. The Cape grapes planted at Vevay proved to be the basis for the first successful wine production in the United States. Today we know why the Cape was successful. It was not a true European variety, but a cross of a wild native grape and a European grape, making it hardy enough to survive in North America while also exhibiting useful wine making characteristics.

The Swiss of Vevay sold wine to merchants in Louisville, Cincinnati, Vincennes, and St. Louis. For the first time, American grown wines were available to the public. The patriotic enthusiasm of the war of 1812 spurred the sale of "Vevay" wine. New Harmony, Indiana was also a site of wine production during this time. But trouble was around the corner. Starting in 1818 the speculative bubble in land prices that had developed on the frontier burst and agricultural prices began to plummet. Soon it was possible to buy a gallon of whiskey for the same price as a bottle of wine. By the 1830's the vineyards were all but gone. The agricultural magazines of the time no longer singled out Vevay as the center of the American wine industry. Cincinnati became the wine capitol of the country from about 1840 until the end of the Civil War. Both banks of the Ohio River were lined with vineyards, earning the nickname the "Rhineland of America."

In the late 1800's and early 1900's wineries dotted the Indiana countryside. Indiana was the tenth largest grape producing state in the country until Prohibition. From the end of Prohibition to the early 1970's, the wine industry in Indiana nearly disappeared. It was revitalized with the Small Winery Act of 1971, which allowed wineries to sell directly to the public rather than through wholesalers.

Today the Indiana wine industry is once again thriving. The Indiana Wine Grape Council, formed in 1989, seeks to enhance the economic development of Indiana by establishing a successful wine grape industry through wine grape research and market development. Based at Purdue University, the Council employs professionals in viticulture (grape growing), enology (wine making), and marketing to provide technical/educational assistance to the commercial growers and vintners in Indiana.

For more information:

Jim Butler, Butler Winery & Vineyard – (812) 339-7233 – vineyard@bluemarble.net
Sally Linton, Indiana Wine Grape Council – (765) 496-3842 – lintons@purdue.edu