

Asparagus Wine Is 'One of a Kind'

As a girl, Kellie Chase had her fill of picking asparagus on the family's West Michigan farm. Making wine from the vegetable—making any kind of wine—was as far-removed from her thinking as the big city excitement she longed for. “I was one of those kids who thought I’d move to the city, never to return.” But after sampling life elsewhere she longed for the country and came home. “I just really missed the laid-back atmosphere,” she explains.

In 1991 Kellie married Todd Fox, whose great-grandparents had launched the family farm business in 1947, and she learned to appreciate her own roots, which span five generations of farmers. “I’ve embraced it. I love family history and learning how my parents and grandparents evolved in farming.” In 2005, she started a market selling fruit and produce from the farm, based in Shelby, near Silver Lake Sand Dunes and Lake Michigan.

A trip to Traverse City wineries inspired Kellie and Todd to try winemaking, and she attended Michigan grape and wine conferences and workshops. “I started buying books and learning as I went,” taking online classes that required working several days at an Iowa winery. In 2008, she began making fruit wines and two years later planted her first grapes.

Although most of the 1,700-acre farm is dedicated to fruit, Oceana County is prime asparagus territory—it’s the home of the National Asparagus Festival—and the veggie is among the Fox crops. Kellie says Todd challenged her to turn the green spears into something drinkable and, skeptically, she added water, sugar and yeast to mashed asparagus. The result was a sweet wine that is not the color of the main ingredient. “This is kind of neat,” she recalls thinking of her experiment. She labeled it “Odd Fox” and quickly sold out of the first wine of its kind. “People love the novelty of it,” she says. The next year she quadrupled the batch, and it was gone in two weeks.



Kellie Fox makes wine from traditional sources like fruit and grapes, but she’s also the creator of a popular wine made from asparagus (right).

Now in her third year of marketing Odd Fox, she is bottling 400 to 500 of the 375 ml bottles, which she sells for \$16 at The Fox Barn Agricultural Marketplace and Winery. She recommends serving the wine with appetizers like cheese and crackers, but has one customer who buys eight or 10 bottles each year for a dinner party featuring asparagus in every course, from hors d’oeuvres through dessert.

Kellie, with some help, now also makes wine from sweet and tart cherries, apples, peaches, plums, pears, blueberries, raspberries, grapes and asparagus. Most samples are complimentary at the tasting bar (due to limited quantities, a \$2 fee applies to Odd Fox and the raspberry wine), and

there’s a short menu of appetizers to enjoy with a glass on a patio behind the barn.

The handsome, century-old, 2,000-square foot Fox Barn is a seasonal home for the farm’s fresh fruit, Michigan-made foodstuffs including jams, maple syrup, salsa and honey, and culinary-related products. Kellie sees it as an agricultural tourism destination with many more possibilities, and it appears the next generation shares her enthusiasm: son Noah is a freshman at Michigan State University studying agricultural business management, and daughter Emelie is a high school senior that’s interested in the farm market, winery, and working with customers. Kellie is thrilled that their Barn “provides a great opportunity for people to interact, and for people who are so far removed from the farm...to see how (farming) is done.”

The Fox Barn, with its classic 1946 Diamond T pick-up truck parked out front, is open Saturdays and Sundays in May and October, and seven days from June through September. It’s a short drive from Hart, which hosts the 39th National Asparagus Festival (see below).

Festival Salutes One of Michigan’s Top Crops

Join the “Age of Asparagus” during the National Asparagus Festival June 7-9, 2013, in Hart, near the Silver Lake Sand Dunes and Lake Michigan. The 39th annual event celebrates the green spear that grows profusely throughout the sandy, well-drained soil of Oceana County; the area between South Haven and Benton Harbor also contributes to Michigan’s asparagus crop of about 25 million pounds annually. Our state is the third largest asparagus producer in the U.S. (California and Washington grow more).

Most Asparagus Festival events are free and happen on Saturday, including a Spear-it 5K Walk/Run, Royale Parade and a food show featuring tastes of asparagus dishes (admission fee). Don’t miss Saturday’s tours to a local asparagus farm where growers talk about the crop, planting and harvesting, and the industry. There’s also entertainment and an Arts & Crafts Fair on Friday and Saturday.

Visit nationalasparagusfestival.org, email nationalasparagusfestival@yahoo.com or call 231-259-0170 for more info.

For asparagus recipes, facts and tips, check out the Michigan Asparagus Advisory Board website: asparagus.org.

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