

# Illinois Wine Country

Gene Meyer, Pittsfield, Illinois

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## Expansion of Grape Production

Coordinator: Marchell Baehr

Location: New Salem, Illinois

SARE Grant: \$4,940

Grant Year: 1998

Project Number: FNC98-237

The late Marchell Baehr was among those who helped to revitalize the Illinois wine industry in the late 1990s. A SARE grant allowed him to plant 10 acres of grapes and experiment with different varieties.

**M**ost people do not think of Illinois as wine country. But it was one of the leading wine-producing states before the government put a federal ban on the sale and consumption of alcohol in 1920. That's when wineries across the country were shut down and vineyards were uprooted for more profitable crops.

While the infamous mobster Al Capone was keeping Chicagoans happy with all the hard stuff they could handle during Prohibition, Illinois wine production was not as thriving. It dropped from being the fourth largest wine-producing state in the nation to boasting a mere 12 operating wineries by the late 1990s.

That has since changed.

Pike County farmer Marchell Baehr was among those who helped the industry build itself back up by attacking the problem at its roots—its plant roots, to be exact. In 1998, Baehr received a SARE grant to help increase grape production in Illinois, providing him with the resources to plant 10 acres of grapes on his farm in New Salem. Baehr mostly planted Catawba, Vignoles, Chamborcin, and Norton grapes.

Meanwhile, across the state the Illinois wine industry roared back onto the scene with more than 70 wineries currently



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operating. Illinois is now among the top 12 wine-producing states in the country.

Although Baehr passed away seven years ago, his vineyard—Rolling Hills Vineyard—is still operating. Meyer, a friend of Baehr's from Pittsfield, became operating manager of the vineyard as a retirement project but has hardly treated it that way.

Meyer decided to stop growing Chamborcin grapes because of low production, and he also added some new varieties, such as Edelweiss grapes, which are about twice as productive as the Vignoles. According to Meyer, Baehr also operated a test plot with 22 different varieties of grapes. But only six of the original varieties are being grown in the plot today.

"I've changed some things during the few years I've been here," says Meyer.

He explains that the resurgence of grape and wine production in Illinois is the result of the healthy soil, good climate, and an advantageous terrain. He says that

grapes thrive on well-drained soil, growing best on hillsides.

"You plant grapes where you wouldn't plant your other crops," he says.

According to Meyer, "A lot of people will say that we get some great fruity flavors in our grapes in Illinois. More so than a lot of the California grapes."

He also says he sells most of his grapes within Illinois—primarily to four wineries, which purchased over 100,000-plus pounds of his grapes in 2008.

Meyer served on the Illinois Grape Growers and Vintners Association, and in 2000 he helped to form the Western Illinois Grape Producers Association Cooperative—where growers in the area can help each other save money on chemicals and other tools.

However, Meyer is not planning on expanding the Rolling Hills Vineyard. Coming up on 66 years, he says he does not have the energy for that.

"My retirement project has already gotten a little out of hand," he says.

*By Jason Peterson*