



Wineries, local foods ripen in Kansas

Legislators watch, ponder zoning legislation as Kansas viticulture makes a comeback thanks in part to the ‘farm-to-table’ movement

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Have you ever thought about or been to wine country in the states or abroad? If so, when thinking about one of those locations, did Kansas ever come to mind?

I would guess probably not. But did you know Kansas once was one of the top wine-producing states in the country — that is, before Carry Nation wielded her hatchet on the bar of the Eaton Hotel in Wichita, Kan., in 1900?

As far back as the 19th century, Kansas was a significant grape-growing state. Its latitude, sunny growing season and soils provided favorable conditions for growing grapes. By the 1870s, Kansas and its neighbor, Missouri, constituted one of the largest grape growing and wine-making regions in the United States.

Unfortunately for those early wine producers, Kansas was the first state in the union to pass a constitutional amendment prohibiting all manufacture and sale of “intoxicating liquors” in 1881. With national prohibition following in 1920, the grape and wine industry in Kansas and Missouri was destroyed.

Even after the repeal of prohibition, strong liquor laws in Kansas prevented the reemergence of the industry until the Kansas Farm Winery Statute was passed in 1985. Provisions had to be made in the Act for a “farm winery” license. You could be a manufacturer, which meant you could make wine, but it was not tied to using Kansas grapes.

Creation of the “farm winery” license encouraged Kansas grape growing because you had to use 60 percent Kansas-grown grapes. Further, federal law states you must use 75 percent juice from Kansas to state on the label “Kansas Wine.” The combination of that requirement, and the privilege of having a tasting room at the farm so the winery could sell direct to consumers, encouraged the expansion of Kansas farm wineries.

You do not have to look further than this example to see the profound effect politics and policy has on agriculture and public perception.

Today, I am proud to be a grape grower in Kansas and to be a part of the comeback of this rich tradition. As a fifth-generation family farm, our business continues to think about ways to respond to changing consumer preferences and opportunities.

In addition to planting grape vines, our farm has reintroduced chickens, hair sheep and dwarf Nigerian goats in recent years, and we have recently constructed a cool house to prolong the growing season for herbs and garden vegetables.

(While not directly related to agriculture, we have also renovated our old farmhouse and offer it as a guest house for those who want to see a farm up close or who just need a quiet country getaway.)

Today, farmers are making decisions to invest large amounts of capital to expand or diversify

Bonded wineries in the Midwest, 2012 to 2017*		
State	February 2012	February 2017
Illinois	98	100
Indiana	61	83
Iowa	89	100
Kansas	24	38
Michigan	122	143
Minnesota	44	64
Nebraska	26	31
North Dakota	8	12
Ohio	134	193
South Dakota	18	22
Wisconsin	73	101

* Bonded wineries are licensed by the federal Alcohol and Tobacco Tax & Trade Bureau and responsible for all production activities taking place on their premises.

Source: Wine Business Monthly

their operations. We are seeing a great deal of farmers sustain themselves as a small farm through diversifying and offering consumer choices such as locally grown foods, organic products and of recent years, agri-tourism.

Everything from “U-pick it” programs to corn mazes and pumpkin patches. However, with success come challenges.

As urban folks flock to the farm, complaints rise about rural road erosion and about music past the normal sundown hours for quaint farm weddings, for example, and have created debate and discussion about urban and rural zoning issues.

Should roads to the venue be a factor to consider? Absolutely! Many rural roads are developed for the amount of traffic and weight of a vehicle predicted to travel there per day. Many residents who purchase property in rural areas probably did not make their purchase with urban or suburban rush hour traffic in mind.

Being good neighbors has always been important for the farm community, and that shouldn’t change despite diversification.

Pressing matters for legislators?

Metropolitan zoning boards require farms in urban areas to get conditional-use permits and provide a formulated square footage of concrete parking and a license for each event.

But urban zoning laws do not always make sense in the country.

For example, people who want to come and visit a farm are trying to get away from asphalt parking and might be excited about experiencing parking

in a pasture and maybe getting a little something on their shoes.

During the Kansas Legislature’s 2017 session, there were rumblings of legislation to provide a blanket zoning ordinance, no matter if you lived in an urban county or rural county.

This is not the direction to go. This is an issue where local policies are best.

In my own county, Sedgwick, agriculture sits right next to Wichita, the largest city in the state, and still plays a significant role in the economy.

A few of us decided to take our case to the metropolitan county planning commission. Knowing that increased regulation was a likely possibility, we wanted to be the first at the table to make sure the rules worked and set a good standard. We wanted our neighbors to enjoy the peace of mind of a quality neighborhood and still provide venues for others to enjoy.

After two years, we were successful. Working together with local units of government and communicating the uniqueness of the attraction and how it will help the local economy was a win/win for our county.

While Kansas has been in the spotlight in recent years for a failed tax policy, other less prominent legislation has moved forward to improve local food markets. The Kansas Legislature formed a task force to explore ways to bring local foods to communities, enhance the economy, and fill in both urban and rural food deserts — all better known as “farm to table” initiatives.

Today, people now more than ever want to know more about where their food comes from and how it is processed. The investments made by small farms are not only helping to tell that story, but are bringing more urban families to the country to experience it firsthand.

We can never stop telling the story of agriculture, for when we do, there will be policies and politics that change the course of its history for years to come. ★

Kansas Sen. Carolyn McGinn, a Republican from Sedgwick, serves as chair of the Ways & Means Committee and its Agriculture & Natural Resources Subcommittee. She is also her chamber’s appointee to the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission.

Submissions welcome

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