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A Good Glass of Wine from the Dressel Dairy? Well ... Almost

By Karen Marshall

Augusta, Missouri, population 250, sits quietly off Highway 94, just beyond two old cemeteries, overlooking the rolling valley of green pastures that marks the long abandoned path of the Missouri River. To most of the city folk in St. Louis, Augusta is just another boring country town meant to be forgotten, but to Lucian Dressel it is an exciting town posing challenges meant to be conquered.

It's not that Dressel is such a hick that Augusta looks big to him. To the contrary, Dressel is a city slicker who not too long ago was the president of his own company, a civic leader on his way up in the business world. But now he is part of Augusta. He even looks the part, having turned in his coat and tie for a pair of bib overalls, a flannel work shirt and a straw hat. He is still a businessman, but equally a laborer, a farmer, a supporter of rural life and a promoter of the product that once brought fame to Augusta - wine.

Before Prohibition, when the town's population was about the same and Missouri was second only to California among the wine producing states, Augusta was the wine capital of Missouri. St. Louis was dependent on the village for a major

portion of its wine and that wine was considered the best in the state. There were 11 wineries in Augusta then. Now there is only one.

The Mount Pleasant Winery is a contemporary reincarnation of what was Augusta's finest winery in the days before Carrie Nation's brand of legislation put an end to Missouri's wine production, ruined Augusta's economy and turned Mount Pleasant's chilly cellars into a fried chicken restaurant.

Even the chicken was gone when Dressel bought Mount Pleasant in 1966. But the winery was in exceptionally good condition thanks to the work of William Baggerman, a history buff who had bought and restored the winery while he shopped for someone interested in growing grapes.

The market for old wineries wasn't good in those days. Mount Pleasant had been for sale nearly three years when Dressel finally decided to gamble his family's financial future on the public's growing taste for fine, dry table wines.

He was 26 and had been drinking wine since his college days in the East, but his taste for

wine didn't figure much in the purchase. 'I didn't get into the business to drink,' he says. Just why he did get into the business and why he has stayed is harder for him to put into words.

"There is just something about it that appeals to me," he said one afternoon as he sat on the winery's balcony drinking a bottle of week-old rosé. "And there's something adventurous about making wine here", he said, emphasizing the word "here" and somehow including the whole state of Missouri as he gestured toward Augusta.

Perhaps the real reason Dressel became a winemaker lies in the fact that he is a man of simple tastes, who thrives on hard work and remembers how he hated the years spent behind a desk when he tried to earn a living with his master's degree in business administration. Besides, he grew up bottling liquids - milk, not wine – in the family dairy in Granite City, Illinois.

"You know, the dairy business is very similar to the wine business. In both cases, you're taking a liquid agricultural product and processing it to keep it from spoiling. And just like in the dairy, I spend 96 percent of my time cleaning things," Dressel said, making a face that quickly melted into a grin.

For all his background with bottling liquids and balancing books, Dressel had a lot to learn about growing grapes and making wine for a profit. He settled his family into the old white frame farmhouse behind the winery, sold the dairy, armed himself with books on wine and hired an assistant - a 14-year-old Augusta boy who was obviously

qualified for the position since he had been christened at the winery.

As he shopped for used equipment to put the winery back into operation, Dressel also shopped for advice. He found both at St. Stanislaus Seminary in Florissant, which until it closed in the early 1960s, was the oldest continuously operating winery in the country.

Dressel may not have been sure how, but he knew he wanted to make fine wines and he wanted to do it the Old World way, the way it had been done when Mount Pleasant wines won medals at the 1893 Columbian Exposition and the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. As Dressel acquired more knowledge, he acquired a keen sense of the winemaking tradition in Missouri, a tradition and history far more illustrious than most Missourians know.

Early Missouri settlers found the area full of wild Ozark grapes, thriving on southern Missouri's sunny slopes and 40-foot deep glacial deposits. Before Prohibition, 48 Missouri counties from the Arkansas line to Hannibal had wineries. The fame of the Missouri vineyards spread far beyond the continent. In fact, Missouri saved the French wine industry.

When a tiny plant louse called phylloxera (a bug believed endemic to Missouri) infested the French vineyards and was rapidly devastating grape crops and the plants themselves, Hermann Jaeger, a wine producer near Neosho, Missouri, came to the rescue. Jaeger sent 17 carloads of cuttings from the hardy phylloxera resistant wild Ozark grapes to France for grafting onto the failing French vines. The vines

survived and a grateful French government awarded Jaeger the French Legion of Honor.

St. Louis was the early center of the country's study of wine and it was here that America's first domestic bottle of champagne was produced. The story of Cook's – Imperial Champagne Cellar is one of the most incredible tales of wine-making in the United States.

Built in 1832 by the Missouri Wine Company, the champagne cellars formed a stone arched labyrinth four levels deep beneath an entire block on Cass Avenue, in what is now the heart of the city of St. Louis. In 1959, the cellars were purchased by Chicagoan Isaac Cook, who made St. Louis Champagnes famous throughout the country.

As the Cook heirs dwindled and Prohibition was repealed, Adolf Heck, Sr., took over management of the firm. (Heck's sons now own and operate the Korbel vineyards in California, major champagne producers.) When the company faced monumental financial problems in 1939, a Swiss firm bought much of the stock.

Several years later as World War II raged, government investigators tracing Nazi investments discovered that Cook's stock was held by ex-champagne salesman Joachim von Ribbentrop, Hitler's foreign minister. Cook's profits were helping finance the German war effort. Cook was seized immediately by the American government.

The Schenley liquor concerns bought Cook's in 1946 (the same year Von Ribbentrop was hanged for war crimes) and less than 10 years later, moved the champagne

operations out of St. Louis. The old champagne cellars now are used to make (ugh!) vinegar. While Cook's was turning out champagne and many other vineyards in Missouri were producing the sweet, foxy Concord and Catawba wines (still the major products in most modern day Missouri wineries), Europeans, especially Germans who missed the dry, tangy wines of their homeland, began producing new French hybrid grapes.

Augusta, where German was the only language taught in the school and spoken in the village, was covered with locally developed grapes.

Carl Muench was the most important of Augusta's vintners. It was Muench who began Mount Pleasant in 1890 and operated it until Prohibition struck in 1920. The European phylloxera epidemic had made French wines hard to get in America and Muench took advantage of the situation, producing wines as close to the French quality as possible.

Cynthiana, a heavy, dark red wine, was Muench's most popular and Dressel is producing it today at Mount Pleasant just about the way Muench did then.

In fact, Dressel does most things at Mount Pleasant today just about as Muench did then, three-quarters of a century ago. There are no gigantic stainless steel vats, no pumps by the hundreds of miles of pipeline to bruise the wine. Or as Dressel puts it himself: "Absent are virtually all of the so called improvements in winemaking made during the last 50 years."

Instead, grapes are crushed by the rollers of the grape crusher, modernized only by

addition of an electric motor. people and money" than working with his beloved grapes.

Mount Pleasant has the capacity for making 60,000 gallons of wine – the size of the typical family vineyard in Europe and about what a huge American winery rinses out as waste in a year. By next year, Dressel hopes to bottle about half that much.

He generally sells all that he bottles before the end of the year – almost totally to people who find their way to Augusta by accident or those who come on purpose, the second time.

Mount Pleasant is a fine blend of Missouri's past and present in winemaking, but it is only one of eight wineries now operating in the state. Missouri's largest wine operation is in St. Louis, where Bardenheier's Wine Cellars have been blending and bottling California wines for distribution in the Midwest for years. A few years ago, Bardenheier also began to grow grapes as well, planting native and French hybrids near Koshdonong, in southern Missouri.

The state's smallest winery, the St. Charles Winery (formerly Wepprich's Wine Garden), probably is better known for atmosphere

than the 2,000 gallons of Concord wine the Ralph Kister family bottles each year.

Three wineries, selling mostly sweeter wines, are in the Rosati-Rolla-St. James area where production of Concord grapes continued through Prohibition for jams and jellies and grape juice.

The Stoltz Vineyard Winery, the Rosati Winery and the St. James Winery all are less than 10 years old and still experimenting with new grape varieties.

One of the state's best-known wineries, Stone Hill in Hermann, was the third-largest in the world before Prohibition, when it converted to mushroom growing. A young farmer, James Held, put the huge old wooden casks back into wine production in 1965, specializing in sweet Catawba, Concord and Niagara.

Missouri's newest winery, Peaceful Bend Vineyard at Steelville, belongs to St. Louis obstetrician-gynecologist Dr. A. N. Arneson and his son, N. Arne Arneson. Their five acres produce about 1,000 gallons of dry table wines (named Meramec, Courtois and Huzzah for nearby rivers) and they don't plan to get larger than 10,000 gallons a year to preserve quality.

Jan. 11, 1974

This article is a story about Mount Pleasant, which was our family home from May, 1951 to May, 1962.

Jean and I began to live there on coming home from our wedding trip and continued to live there until our new home was built at 20 Briarwood Lane, St. Charles, Mo.

We moved from Mount Pleasant because as the children grew up we wanted to give them better schooling opportunities and more cultural opportunities as would only be available in or nearer a larger city.

William F. Baggerman