



# Vintage Kentucky

**Move over, bourbon. Kentucky wines are winning international awards as the Bluegrass State reclaims its wine-making heritage, one that began with America's first commercial vineyard in 1798.**

*Bourbon* has been synonymous with Kentucky for nearly two centuries, and most people say the Kentucky Derby wouldn't be the same without its bourbon-based Mint Juleps. But as more people turn to wine for enjoyment, Kentucky varietals are edging their way into the attention of wine enthusiasts nationwide.

Wine production in Kentucky is not new. French winemaker Jean-Jacques Defour formed the Kentucky Vineyard Society in 1798 and purchased 600 acres for vineyards on the Kentucky River with backing by several prominent statesmen. His first vintage went to oenophile Thomas Jefferson. Kentucky was the third-largest grape and wine producer in the nation before Prohibition forced farmers to destroy grapevines in the early 1920s. Many turned to tobacco farming, but with the decline of that industry farmers returned to grape growing in the late 1990s.

Today, Kentucky's cabernets, chardonnays, merlots, and other varietals are helping make agritourism a thriving business in the central and northern parts of the state. Visitors are often surprised not only at the picturesque vineyards, but also by the rich flavors of the wines.

"It's great to see the 'ah-ha' moments when people taste our wines for the first time," says Cynthia Bohn, winemaker and owner of Equus Run Vineyards, located in thoroughbred horse country west of Lexington.

A retired IBM executive, Cynthia bought the former tobacco farm in 1998 and has built it into one of the state's best known wineries. CNN Travel voted Equus Run as a *Must-See Hidden Treasure of the U.S.*, and each year Cynthia produces a much-sought after limited edition bottling for the Kentucky Derby. This year, only 138 bottles of the collectible

cabernet sauvignon are available at \$80 each for the 138th "Run for the Roses."

The Equus Run Cabernet Franc was awarded a silver medal at the Finger Lakes International Wine Competition last year, but the vineyard's best-selling item is what Bohn calls her "mistake wine." The Cabernet Sauvignon Blanc de Noir was created when one of her farmhands unintentionally blended chardonnay with cabernet sauvignon.



Winemaker Cynthia Bohn of Equus Run is a retired IBM executive. Photo by Mary Ann DeSantis

"People kept asking for it, so I kept making it," says Cynthia, who grew up on a farm in Kentucky and later studied viticulture at University of California-Davis.

Kentucky's loamy soils and deep limestone shelves have allowed many of the vineyards to craft award-winning varietals. The cabernet sauvignon 2007 at the Jean Farris Winery on the eastern side of Lexington won a double gold medal at the 2012 San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition. Two other Jean Farris wines, the Petite Syrah and Tempest (a blend of tempranillo, cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc) both placed at the same competition. A wall in the

tasting room is filled with awards, but the proof that these wines are something to write home about is the patron-packed bistro. What began as a winery has also become one of Lexington's most popular dining spots.

Jean Farris and her husband, Ben O'Daniel, whose family owned one of Kentucky's first wineries, met in 1997 on a University of Kentucky-sponsored tour of Missouri wineries. Jean's family had reclaimed a strip-mined mountain top and planted vineyards. When asked where the grapes were grown for the complex petite syrah, Ben pointed to the window and said, "Right behind you."

On the south side of Lexington lies Talon Winery, another picturesque and award-winning vineyard where visitors can watch the entire winemaking process from vine to bottle. Winemaker Kerry Jolliffe is a master at explaining how Kentucky's climate and soil affect the grape-growing process.

"Because of our warm nights, we don't always get the jammy flavors like California wines do," he says. "Our wines are soft and smooth, and very drinkable for the average person. Many people who say they like only sweet wines find our dry reds and whites very approachable."

Talon's popular selling chardonnay is aged in French oak barrels and has hints of vanilla and tropical fruit. Kerry says it has to be good because his wife is a chardonnay drinker. "I have to make it to her liking," he says with a chuckle.

Kentucky has more than 50 wineries statewide, and the harvest occurs in late August and early September. Wines can be shipped to Florida, but they are relatively expensive because most are handcrafted. Tastings, however, are reasonable and offer enjoyable experiences for wine enthusiasts looking for new wine destinations.

For more information, visit [www.Kentuckywines.com](http://www.Kentuckywines.com).