

SALUTÉ

THE LAKE & SUMTER WINE TRAIL

Lake and Sumter Counties do not have an “official” wine trail...yet... but the idea isn’t so far-fetched. After all, this area now has four interesting wineries that attract tourists and locals alike. It’s just a matter of time before someone figures out the next step is a shuttle bus to get from one winery to another. In the meantime, get a designated driver and spend a day exploring the local wine scene. You will find fun entertainment, beautiful tasting rooms, interesting “cellar” tours, and a wine for every palate.

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ILLUSTRATION: JOSH CLARK

LAKERIDGE WINERY & VINEYARDS

19239 U.S. 27 NORTH, CLERMONT
LAKERIDGEWINERY.COM



Anyone coming into Lake County via U.S. Hwy 27 can’t miss the French-looking chateau on picturesque hills near Clermont. In fact,

Lakeridge Winery & Vineyard has become one of Trip Advisor’s top-rated attractions in Lake County and is visited by 160,000 people annually. Established in 1989, Lakeridge is the granddaddy of all of Florida wineries with its state-of-the-art production facility and large tasting room.

Lakeridge Winery offers complimentary winery tours and tastings seven days a week until 5 p.m. The tours are as thorough and informative about the wine production process as many in Napa or Sonoma. When the tour is over, you’ll taste award-winning premium wines made with Florida’s native grape varieties, all grown at the 127-acre estate in Clermont and on Lakeridge’s 450 acres in the Panhandle. Its 11 varieties of wines have won more than 600 awards for excellence in winemaking and are sold in wine shops throughout Florida.

In addition, if you are not a wine drinker—or you’re the designated driver—there’s still a lot to do and see at Lakeridge Winery, especially during one of its many festivals that benefit local charities.

WHISPERING OAKS WINERY

10934 N. COUNTY ROAD 475, OXFORD
WINESOFFLORIDA.COM

Last November, Johannes Vanderwey and his wife, Panpailin, opened Whispering Oaks Winery on County Road 475 in Oxford amid 40,000 blueberry bushes that he’d planted six years earlier. During a 3-day grand opening

celebration, he served his handcrafted blueberry wines to more than 7,000 people. Since then, an estimated 40-to-50,000 people have stopped by to enjoy the winery and he’s sold almost 21,000 bottles in 14 locations throughout Florida. He also added the title “award-winner” to several wines that brought home medals from a number of prestigious wine competitions.

During the free tours, visitors can see state-of-the-art equipment from Italy used to make five different flavors of blueberry wines, ranging from sweet to dry. The tasting room and visitor’s center is as nice as those in world-famous wine regions. Formerly an old horse barn, the visitors’ center contains artistically decorated wine tasting rooms, a bar, and gift-shop area. Outside the newly added outdoor patio is hopping on weekends with entertainment and, of course, wine tastings.



JOHANNES VANDERWEY





**WE'VE
POURED OUR
HEART AND
SOUL INTO
THIS PLACE.
WE WANT
PEOPLE TO
COME OUT
AND ENJOY IT.**

— JOE WINIARSKI

JOE & MELISSA WINIARSKI



BACKYARD BARN WINERY AND MICROBREWERY

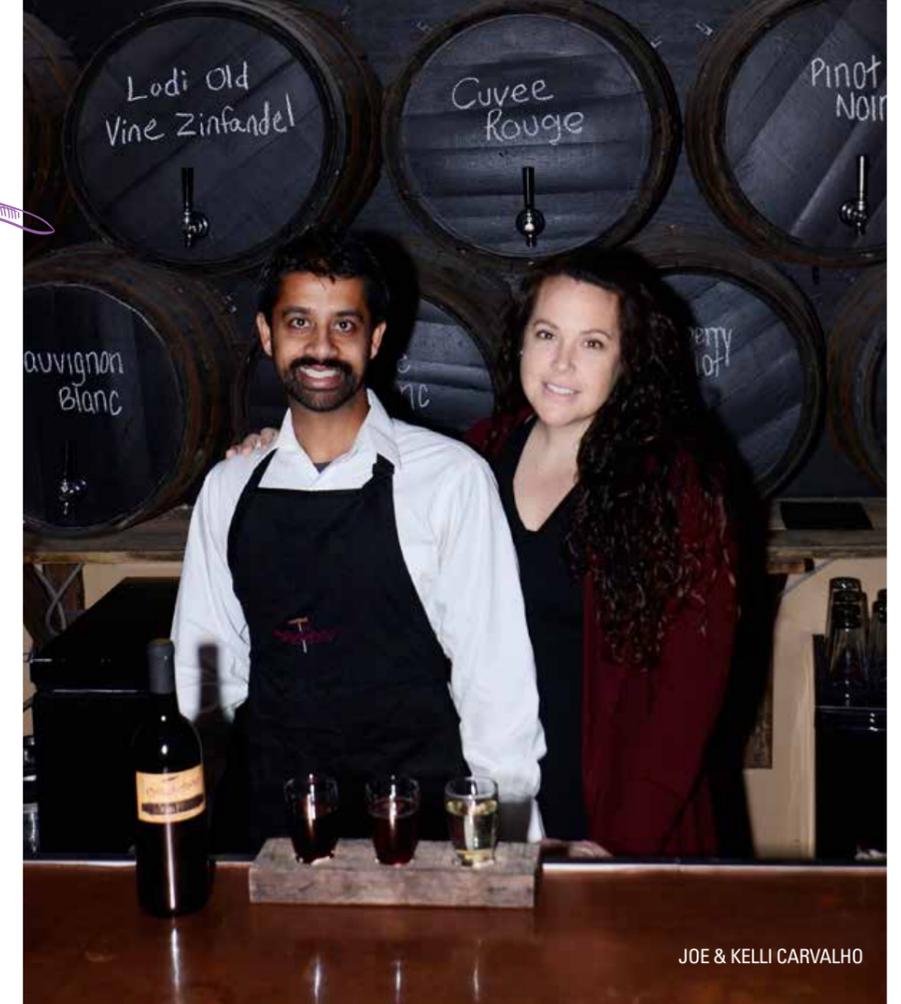
1945 EAST COUNTY ROAD 462, WILDWOOD
BACKYARDBARNWINERY.COM

Joe and Melissa Winiarski are the new kids on the winery block, having just opened Backyard Barn Winery and Microbrewery—literally in their backyard—in August. They've owned the property since 2002 and broke ground for the tasting room on Thanksgiving Day two years ago, but getting licenses took time. The farm-based small-batch winery and microbrewery is a laid-back environment where Winiarski hopes everyone will feel like they are at "Cheers," the bar made famous in a 1980s sitcom.

Backyard Barn Winery makes 27 varieties of wine, including "Mead"—a rare and delicious honey wine that originated in medieval times, and ever-increasing number of craft beers. In addition, they grow six varieties of hops and have partnered with the University of Florida to research the best growing techniques in warm climates. Backyard Barn is one of the few establishments in Florida to hold a dual license for a winery and a microbrewery.

The couple has created a tranquil setting—complete with two pairs of black and white swans. Visitors can gather around outdoor fire pits or inside the tasting room at a bar from an 1875 Virginia farmhouse.

"We've poured our heart and soul into this place," said Joe. "We want people to come out and enjoy it."



JOE & KELLI CARVALHO

CORKSCREW WINERY

1171 MAIN ST. (SPANISH SPRINGS), THE VILLAGES
THECORKSCREWWINERY.COM

Wrap up your Lake and Sumter wine tour at Corkscrew Winery at Spanish Springs in The Villages, where most evenings you'll find great entertainment and where you can try your hand at making your own wine. Owner Joe Carvalho has seen firsthand the popularity of winemaking at both of his Corkscrew Winery locations. Last year, he and his wife, Kelli, opened the Spanish Springs location in a storefront shop that resembles a rustic Italian winery.

"We had so many people coming from The Villages to our Ocala location that we decided to open a winery here," Carvalho said. "Our purpose is to educate people about craft wine and beer. We don't want anyone to

feel intimidated when it comes to making their own."

Corkscrew Winery also serves wines on tap that Carvalho makes. He anticipated his first batches for the new location would last years, but within months they were gone. And surprisingly, his most popular wine isn't made with grapes, but rather green apples. The tart Green Apple Riesling sells out quickly.



ABOUT THE WRITER

Living in Italy was the catalyst for Mary Ann DeSantis to understand more about wine, and she now enjoys sharing what she's learned. Since 2010, *Saluté* has covered topics for oenophiles of all levels—from novice wine drinkers to experienced connoisseurs. The column received a 2014 Florida Magazine Association Silver Award for Best Department and a 2012 Florida Press Club Excellence in Journalism Award for Commentary.