

Mission accomplished

A little-known Michigan wine country goes big (and why to visit now)

By NICOLE RUPERSBURG

THE car is cresting over the gentle hills of Michigan's Old Mission Peninsula, whipping around curves at 70 miles per hour. It is a clear night, the air is damp, perfumed with burning wood, the smell of fall.

Top down, music blaring, I look up to my right to see the stars of the Little Dipper burning white hot through ink-black sky. There are few perfect moments in life. This definitely feels like one of them.

Found on the northwestern coast of Michigan's Lower Peninsula (got that?), the Old Mission — 19 miles long by three miles wide — is the crown on the head of the resort town of Traverse City. At times, the peninsula is so narrow, you can park your car on the side of the road and drink in panoramic views of sloping vineyards and sparkling bays on either side.

The Old Mission is at the heart of a corner of Michigan that is getting something of a cosmopolitan makeover, thanks to nationally-recognized events like the Traverse City Film Festival, nods to the food scene from national publications and a slew of free advertising from celeb chef Mario Batali, who spends part of the year in the nearby town of Northport with his

Nicole Rupersburg(2)

family.

The Old Mission is wine country, first and foremost. Comprising the entire peninsula, the Old Mission American Viticultural Area (AVA) is getting some serious notice. Here, you are on the same latitude — the 45th parallel — as France's Bordeaux region.

"Before, when I would say I'm a Michigan winemaker people would say, 'Why?'" says Sean O'Keefe, specialty wine maker at Chateau Grand Traverse, the largest and oldest winery on Old Mission.

O'Keefe — and many other winemakers in the area — specialize in Riesling. His 2008 Lot 49 Riesling won Best of Class at the 2010 International Wine and Spirits Competition in London, considered to be a grand dame on the wine and spirits competition circuit.

"There are a lot of wines in the world," he says. "You have to grow to your strengths. We're meant to be a great Riesling region."

It is not only Riesling around here. Another big winner at the IWSC was Old Mission's Brys Estate, medaling for their ice wine, Gewurtztraminer, and their unfiltered Pinot Noir.

"It's the proudest I've ever been of a bronze medal!" laughs estate manager Coenraad Stassen. "Our Pinot Noir went up against all the Burgundys in the \$50 category ... it's a little bit of spinoff of what happened in 1976 when the U.S. beat the French at their own game."

The small size of the Old Mission also works to a winemaker's advantage.

"Our obscurity is a positive," Sean says. "Every sommelier wants to be the first person to 'discover' something; it's like finding an indie band before anyone else does."

Where there is good wine, you also hope there will be good food, and on this front, the Old Mission does not disappoint.

A dozen-or-so little farmers' stands are scattered up and down Michigan's Route 37





OLD IS NEW: Taste the wine, view the scenery (top inset) and soak up the vibe of the Old Mission (lower inset).

— the peninsula’s main drag — along with some truly farm-to-table restaurants.

Mission Table isn’t the best-known restaurant in the area, though it certainly is one of the best. Executive Chef Paul Olson just quietly does what he does — fussing with the basil in his garden with a wry smile, bantering with his co-workers with delicious sarcasm.

This place has dropped all pretension. Out with the white linens and \$40 entrees, in with small plates for around \$12 a pop (think tender, succulent lamb loin with oven-roasted cauliflower, or crispy pork belly with house-made kimchi, roasted Brussel sprouts and a poached egg).

The restaurant is a true representation of the indigenous flavors of Michigan, a state where, after all, agriculture is the number two industry. Following, of course, manufacturing.

For more on the region and a how-to guide, log on to nypost.com/travel now.

