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COVER STORY

The Missouri Governor's Cup Wine Competition brings in top professionals from across the world to select and rank the wines of Missouri. Wines are sniffed, swirled, sorted and studied for several days in July each year, but there can only be a few winners. On page 24, learn about one grape grower and winemaker who won awards while representing the industry.



ON THE COVER

Mike Riley, co-owner of Shamrock Hills Vineyard & Winery, carries buckets of Crimson Cabernet grapes during harvest. He grows the hybrid variety for his winery.
Photo by James Fashing



Raising the bar on Missouri wines

Governor's Cup showcases award-winners while helping improve the state's industry

Story & photos by James Fashing

Grapes from the 2026 crop are harvested at Shamrock Hills Vineyard and Winery in Excelsior Springs, Mo. Typical yield from a ton of hand-picked wine grapes is roughly 150 gallons of finished wine, which calculates to around 750 bottles. Yields can vary by varietal and growing season.

Just a few years ago, Missouri had a reputation for being a source of only sweet wines made primarily for local tastes. The industry has fought hard against that perception, increasing in quality and status as wines from the Show-Me State win major contests across the world and make inroads in the fine wine category.

But those successes come at a time when wine consumption is declining, vineyards are being ripped from the ground, and producers are looking for ways to attract a new generation of consumers. For Missouri growers and winemakers, the challenge is clear: make wines good enough to win awards and compelling enough to keep a centuries-old tradition alive.

Prior to Prohibition, Missouri was a top producer of wine in the U.S. with products awarded highest honors at the World's Fair of 1904. Today, the state has around 115 wineries, depending on how licenses are counted. Their offerings range from top-quality sweet wines to a focus on premium dry wines.

Mike Riley is one such grape producer and winery owner. He specializes in dry wines he likes to drink and grows many of the grapes his wine is made from on his 323-acre farm in Excelsior Springs, Mo., just east of Kansas City. Riley, who comes from the civil engineering world, started Shamrock Hills Vineyard and Winery in 2023 with his wife, Denise, a farm kid. She manages the winery's tasting room and wedding venue, while he makes the wine from the 6.5 acres of six grape varieties he grows when not working as an engineer. They have plans to add more to their 4,000-vine operation.

This year, Riley's products won a few medals in the Missouri Governor's Cup Wine Competition, the top wine-judging event in the state. In fact, this relative newcomer to the market won four gold medals, six silver medals and two best-of-class awards in the 2026 competition.

Riley attributes his success in part to the experts at the University of Missouri Grape and Wine Institute and resources from the Missouri Grape and Wine program, including its Wine Technical Group, for which he has volunteered.

"They and folks in the industry have all been very helpful. I'm all-in and have to be," Riley said. "If you want to be in it, you need to submerge yourself in it. The only way you're going to get better at this is to network, get to know people and ask questions. Be there for them, and they'll be there for you."



The Rileys grow Crimson Cabernet, a cross between one of the most famous grapes in the world, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Norton, Missouri's native variety. The cross yields a grape that handles Midwest weather and offers a popular wine profile.

Mike and Denise Riley, owners of Shamrock Hills Vineyard and Winery, bring in buckets of an early-morning September harvest from their hybrid grapes. The couple plans to expand their plantings to more vines and varietals to meet demand at their rural Excelsior Springs, Mo., facility.



Embracing the grape challenge

As Riley well knows, the type of wine grapes grown in Missouri is both a hurdle and an opportunity. Currently, there are over 1,700 acres of wine grapes in the state.

The continental climate of land east of the Rocky Mountains is different from coastal temperature-regulated environments in noted wine regions such as Napa, Calif. Midwest climates present multiple challenges to growing wine grapes. With a few exceptions, most wines made from the grapes grown in MFA territory are hybrids that were bred to handle the winter cold and summer humidity. Unlike more familiar grapes such as Cabernet, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, the varietals that grow best here are lesser known, including Chambourcin, Vignoles and Chardonel. While these names may spark interest in the curious new-to-wine crowd, they often take some educational marketing to sell.

That challenge is one reason the Governor's Cup Wine contest does more than hand out medals and awards—the program also helps market Missouri wines. And with a new focus on improving wine from the state, this year's entrants received more feedback from the judging process. Each team was assigned a "scribe" who reported constructive—and sometimes not-so-constructive—comments from the judges.

The grape-picking team at Shamrock Hills Vineyard and Winery this year consists mostly of volunteers. They start at sunrise and work until lunchtime when they are treated to wood-fired pizza and their favorite wines.

Winemakers also get a chemical analysis with technical suggestions on how to improve their wines in the future. This testing is completed at the MU Grape and Wine Institute with help from state-of-the-art equipment that uses infrared scanning and spectrum analysis. The wines can be tested for multiple acids, alcohols and sugars, including measuring levels that explain common wine faults. The lab offers these tests throughout the year to Missouri growers and wineries at significantly reduced cost, thanks in part to funding from the Missouri Grape and Wine program and supported by a portion of the taxes paid at the register on all wine sold in the state.

Sorting the best from the rest

The Governor's Cup contest is conducted each July, when volunteers and workers from the Missouri Grape and Wine



As multiple best-of-class award winners, the Rileys were invited to pour their wines at the Missouri State Fair Wine 101 class. Denise pours wines as Mike shares the stage with Annette Alden, Missouri Grape and Wine Program marketing director.

program, Missouri Department of Agriculture and University of Missouri Grape and Wine Institute assemble to unbox, sort and serve the wine to judges. The event is invitation-only, and winery employees are not allowed in the venue during the judging.

Day 1 is all about art. A team of three experts judge the design of wine labels and

award medals for quality and creativity. There is also a "people's choice" category that allows customers to vote online. This day also gives time for the team to set up in another room for the following two days of tasting.

Day 2 is Round 1 of tasting. The wines are divided into categories by entry and judged by two, four-judge panels. Roughly half of the wines go to each judging team. The judging is done as blind tastings, with no knowledge of what wine is being evaluated, only the category being judged. The glasses are marked only with an anonymous number, and each is scored, ranking or disqualifying it for gold, silver or bronze medals. Judges may ask for a re-pour from another bottle if a flaw was detected, just in case the fault was isolated to that particular bottle.

The gold-medal-winning wines advance to the next day of tastings. The judges then form one big team and blind taste

Left: The Shamrock Hills Vineyard and Winery trellis is made of posts designed specifically for vineyards and has drip irrigation to make sure dry Missouri summers don't steal yield and affect vine health during establishment.

Below: Returning wine judge, Cat Neville, is the producer of the syndicated PBS food TV series, Tastemakers. She scores this "flight" of white wines that happened to contain this year's top award winner.





Top: The final votes of the contest bring the judges together in one big team to determine best of class and the top three awards, including the Missouri Governor's Cup.

Above left: Tabulating scores takes concentration from the contest team. From left is Dean Volenberg, Jim Anderson, Madison Moll, Victoria Washburn and Annette Alden.

Above right: This year's wine contest judges had diverse backgrounds and training. Left to right are Mike Riley, winemaker; Mike Ward, wine journalist; Audrey Ivanov, Master Sommelier; Alisha Blackwell Calvert, CSW Advanced Sommelier; Doug Frost, Master Sommelier and Master of Wine; Cat Neville, wine journalist; Jill Blume, enologist and wine educator; and Anne Zwink, winemaker.

Right: Jill Blume is a wine educator and enology specialist for Purdue University, and this was her first year judging the competition.

all the winning wines from the first round. Discussions can turn into passionate debates when someone makes a case for or against a specific wine. The deliberation continues until the judges pick the top awards including the best of each class; the grand prize Governor's Cup; the C.V. Riley award, given to the top Norton red wine; and the Husmann-Jaeger award for best white varietal wine.

The eighth wine judge

The judges include a mix of seven industry experts including winemakers, sommeliers and wine writers who rotate in and serve for a maximum of three consecutive years. Recently, the contest specified that an eighth judge be a Missouri wine industry representative. This judge's vote is limited to initial rounds when finalists are sorted into medal winners and non-award contenders. The industry judge vote doesn't count in any of the best of class or top named awards but can participate in the discussions. A new industry judge is chosen each year.

Missouri wine's economic impact

According to a newly commissioned study completed this June, the total economic wine-tourism impact in Missouri is an estimated \$256 million per year, creating 2,910 related jobs and labor income of \$117 million annually.

Specifically, wineries produce 640,000 gallons of wine crushed and fermented from Missouri's grape-bearing acres, which produce 4,500 tons of wine grapes. This generated \$49.1 million in direct Missouri wine business. Add to that, the state's 115-plus wineries employ 910 people full time—not counting smaller operations that are run as sole proprietorships.

In 2025, Missouri was ranked 10th in the U.S. for wineries by production, as reported by the industry group Wine America. The rankings were based on gallons sold as reported by the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau. While that production fluctuates year by year, quality is on the rise, and more investments are being made in the industry. The University of Missouri College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources will soon open a new research winery, an addition to the ag engineering building on the Columbia campus. The project is part of the MU Grape and Wine Institute, which will also move its lab to the engineering wing.

This year's eighth judge was none other than Shamrock Hills' Mike Riley, the multiple award-winner introduced earlier.

"At first, I was a little intimidated being with judges who have so much experience," Riley said. "Some of these folks regularly drink the best wines from across the world. But it didn't take long to understand that we were on the same page most of the time."

Interestingly, Riley judged a few of his Shamrock Hills wines since half of the entries went in front of him on the first day of tasting. He'd entered the contest before finding out he'd be the industry representative judge and found himself arguing both for and against his own wines in the blind tasting.

For Governor's Cup judges, giving criticism and comments on a wine, varietal or style while one of the winemaker contestants is part of the group could seemingly make it difficult to be honest and constructive. Riley, however, said he felt like he could offer something none of the other judges could—the perspective of a winemaker who also grows local grapes.

"I noticed a few times from the discussion that a judge didn't know just how difficult it is to make wine from a specific variety of grape being judged," Riley said. "But I learned more from the experience than I contributed."

For more information, visit online at MissouriWine.org, shamrockhillsvineyard.com and MissouriGrapeGrowers.org. **F**

Editor's note: Today's Farmer's digital editor James Fashing, author of this article, was invited to watch the wine contest unfold this year and took his camera along. The topic has special meaning to Fashing—this was his family's 28th season of growing Norton and Seyval wine grapes on their farm in Audrain County.



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