

When Local is Not That Local

Recently there has been press about the Minnesota Farm Winery Law requirement of 51% Minnesota grapes and/or fruit being used in the production of Minnesota wines. This requirement is now being challenged by two Minnesota farm wineries in the state. I believe that ultimately allowing Minnesota farm wineries to import more than 49% would have a detrimental effect on local growers and local wine producers and would not be in spirit of the Minnesota Farm Winery Act. Selling wines as a Minnesota farm winery, that are produced with mostly non-local grapes, is in my opinion, generally disingenuous. For those that wish to sell wines produced with non-local wine, grapes or juice, there is an existing, separate liquor manufacturing license available. There is also a provision for farm wineries to import in the case of a catastrophic loss due to weather or other reasons.

When we started Salem Glen Winery in 2006 as a farm winery, we were proud to be part of a growing community of researchers, growers and producers focused on developing and fostering a unique, local, or at least regional, wine culture and identity. This identity is founded on the production of local wines with local grapes. We understood at the time that producing wines in our climate would be difficult and would require a significant amount of time and skill. While we had the option of importing some California wines, juice and grapes, we believed that it would be a disservice and undermine others in the area who have worked so hard to make a unique, regional, value added product. We now successfully produce over 14 varieties of wines using cold-weather grapes that are enjoyed by the thousands. Through good business planning, we have always been able to have enough wine to sell each year. Many other Minnesota wineries are also operating successfully and producing outstanding wines. An increased importation of non-local grapes would jeopardize the healthy expansion of our local grape and wine industry.

To give a bit more background on why the Minnesota Farm Winery Act was created. As stated in the Farm Winery Minnesota House of Representative Information Brief:

“Farm wineries are given a special status in Minnesota’s liquor laws, a policy chosen specifically to encourage and support the fledgling farm winery industry. State efforts also nurture grape growing and winemaking via financial and technical assistance, applied research and outreach, and tourism promotion.”

The special status gives farm wineries the ability to:

- Sell products on Sundays
- Sell via the Internet
- Give Samples
- Import additional grapes in bad years with approval from the commissioner

In order to have this special status, a farm winery must:

- Be located on agriculture land
- Use 51% Minnesota grapes or other fruit to create the wine

There are over 50 wineries in Minnesota operating under the law and many are successful and have been around for over a decade. Many are working with quality grapes that are grown in Minnesota and are producing great wines. There are not any shortcuts and the production of great Minnesota wines made with local and regional grapes takes time, skill, and patience.

Dustin Ebert
Salem Glen Winery