



Tuscan-inspired Blue Sky Vineyard in Makanda.



The table is set for a feast at Feather Hills Vineyard in Cobden.



Food from the Cold Blooded Smokehouse & Catering.

Southern Illinois Hospitality on the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail

MARY KLEST TAKES YOU TO AN UNEXPECTED VINEYARD DESTINATION

YOU DON'T have to travel far to jumpstart an adventure. Imagine yourself with family or friends celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail in Southern Illinois. The 40-mile wine trail is home to 11 wineries, each with its own history and style to explore. Here's our plan!

Pack casual clothes. We can get there via train, car, or plane. Let's fly. The one-and-a-half-hour flight from O'Hare on Contour Airlines can cost less than \$100 per round trip. We're off to a good start. And it just gets better.

We land at Veterans Airport in Marion. A pre-arranged van with a driver awaits at the airport to transport us to the first vineyard, Honker Hill, on the outskirts of Carbondale. The family-owned winery is operated by brothers Mike and Matt Lucas. We take a sip of their award-winning 2023 Southern Hunt Red with notes of black-

berry, raspberry, and chocolate. We sniff and swirl Wally's Red, an aromatic dry wine made with their Chambourcin grapes. Mike sees that we are somewhat uptight northerners. "Relax and take in the beautiful view on the outdoor patio. Dance to live music on the weekends," he says. After our relaxing patio break, Mike bids us farewell saying: "Thank you, God bless."

If you had a good experience in elementary school, the Davie School Inn in Anna will be sure to delight. The owners converted a former school's classrooms into an inn, leaving the chalkboards intact. On our first night we eat at The Brick House nearby. Menu choices include cashew crusted chicken, hand-cut pork chops with goat cheese butter, and linguini tossed with vegetables and herbs. Along with our delicious meal we are treated to a rosé wine tasting led by our next vineyard owner, Hanna Wichmann.

Hanna is a former mental health counselor who as owner of a vineyard tends acres of vines, operates a processing lab containing towering steel bins, and hosts the vineyard's cozy tasting room. A true multi-tasker, she says: "Growing grapes is an everyday challenge. One can't control nature." She and her husband bought the vineyard from her dad who shared this advice with her: "You have to be a warrior."

Leaving the Wichmann Vineyard we wind through the Shawnee National Forest. Let's immerse ourselves in the Japanese tradition of shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing. We invoke all five senses, smelling the earthy fragrance emanating from the trees, soil, and vines. Magnify the textures and shades of green that surround us. Quiet our



Fruit of the vine in July at Blue Sky Vineyards.



Hanna Wichmann in the tasting room at Wichmann Vineyard in Cobden.

minds, listening to the bird calls and rippling creek water. We mindfully savor sips of wine and cider.

We understand that the wineries are not just commerce, but a lifestyle of which we have become a part. “This is a great life. I like talking with the people who venture through,” says Brad Genung, owner at Owl Creek Vineyard in Cobden. He was a Wall Street finance guy with an MBA and years of experience as a brokerage investment researcher. Influenced by the English cider makers, he generously pours us samples of his wine and cider. “No beer,” he exclaims.

At the east end of the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail in Makanda sits the Blue Sky Vineyard. Our driver says, “It’s the biggest winery and nicest to look at.” It could pass for a villa in Tuscany. The general manager gives us a tour that includes a story of an eccentric father who bought the land for his family. Chambourcin is the workhorse grape and Niagara the mule.

We sway to live music and mingle with locals in the event barn at StarView Vineyards. A citrus finish in their Seyval 2022 dry white wine tangs the tongue. A hint of peach lingers from the Vignoles 2022, a semi-dry white wine. The nose knows an aromatic 2021 dry red Cabernet Sauvignon. Owners Regina and Brett Morrison found the property online. They bought it and moved from Pittsburgh to Cobden.

Randy Feather is a Southern Illinois native, who along with his wife Renee, has created an all-encompassing entertainment venue. You can eat, drink, stay, listen to live music, and join their wine club. At a set table we take our seats as they present an exquisite five-course meal paired with perfect wines: dry Syrah Rosé, a fruity Vidal Blanc, dry red Chambourcin, Chambourcin reserve, and a sparkling Vignoles with dessert. Luscious.

We can’t visit all the vineyards in a weekend, so we save those for another time. What they have in common is passionate, hardworking people holding on to and building a legacy of hospitality and community. Some things are meant to last, including vineyards in Southern Illinois. Happy 30th anniversary to the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail!

To learn more about the region, vineyards, events, fees, lodging, dining, and attractions, visit the ShawneeWineTrail.com and SouthernMos-tIllinois.com websites. Vineyard hours may fluctuate during the week and year. U

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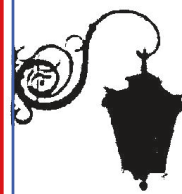
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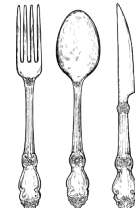


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