

# Who Needs Napa?

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Several years ago, I lived in San Francisco. Whenever family and friends would visit me, we'd spend a day touring the incredible California wineries of Napa and Sonoma Counties. It was a reasonably inexpensive way to spend an unforgettable day.

Now that I'm back in South Jersey, we have different ways to spend our days with visitors. We generally hit the beach, the Boardwalk, maybe a casino. We don't really think about wine. Why should we? After all, how many wineries do we have in New Jersey?

Surprisingly, quite a few.

Here is a little known fact: according to Rich Small, Marketing Consultant for the Garden State Wine Growers Association, New Jersey is the fifth largest producer of wines in the United States, after only California, Washington, Oregon, and New York. New Jersey is home to over thirty licensed wineries, with more slated to spring up annually. Add to this the fact that there are eight licensed wineries between Cape May and Atlantic Counties alone, and it's hard to believe that most of us are unaware that we're living in our very own wine country.

As it turns out, most of the northeast is inhospitable to growing grapes due to a wet and cold climate. But there are carve-out regions here where the environment is just right. South Jersey is one such region. Al Natali of Natali Vineyards in Cape May Court House explained, "Grape vines don't really care about good soil. They care more about the drainage. Vines don't like standing in 'wet feet.'"

While we usually think of wine being produced in mountainous regions like the Napa Valley where the sloped terrain provides adequate drainage for vines, South Jersey's mostly flat land boasts a comparable advantage to preventing those 'wet feet' - sand. The sandy soil of South Jersey provides excellent water drainage and is one of three characteristics unique to our area that result in an ideal growing environment.

The second advantage is our proximity to two large bodies of water. Cape May County is nestled between the Atlantic Ocean and the Delaware

Bay, both of which provide a temperate growing climate for vines in our region. By moderating land temperature and preventing the types of freezing temperatures that kill grapes, the Atlantic Ocean and Delaware Bay provide South Jersey with an extended growing season.

The third advantage is our water-borne breezes. They contribute to the area's moderate temperatures and also help to maximize the character and flavor of the grapes.

While many of our local wineries are fledgling endeavors, they are nonetheless part of what is becoming big business in the State of New Jersey. A huge agricultural state, New Jersey wants to encourage its farmers to keep farming. And while some are giving up their farms because it is such a difficult way to make a living these days, others - like Hawk Haven's Todd Wuerker - have made the move away from produce into grapes and wine production. As a fast growing segment of the agricultural economy of our state, winemaking and winemakers are supported by both the New Jersey Department of Agriculture and Garden State Winegrowers Association. Both work to promote the wineries through the Jersey Fresh Initiative, the expansion of retail outlets, and the sponsorship of festivals, wine passports, and event promotion. The goal is to bring more attention to our award-winning New Jersey wines, and more revenue to the State of New Jersey.

Smart entrepreneurs are also benefiting from the increased production of wine in our region. Mike Curran, owner of Arrive in Style Luxury Limousine, Inc., is one such individual. Inspired by an article in 'Limousine Digest' about wine tours in Napa Valley, Curran and his wife, Eileen, expanded their family-owned limousine service two years ago to include New Jersey wine tours. The tours generally last four hours and include visits to four New Jersey wineries. Prices vary by season but are very reasonable, running from \$250 to \$325 for a six to eight person limo, to \$325 to \$400 for a shuttle bus. Arrive in Style also provides a complimentary keepsake gift of custom-made wine glass charms for each customer.

*All winery images by Ginny Leith*





Cape May Winery and Vineyard

Curran said that his biggest challenge is the fact that people don't realize that wineries exist in New Jersey. He's eager to help educate them, offering to have passports stamped for customers and collaborating with vineyards. When taking a wine tour with Arrive in Style, customers avoid paying the usual tasting fees at wineries, a savings of \$3 to \$7 per person per winery. Curran also encourages his customers to attend wine festivals throughout the state.

One of these is the Third Annual Cape May County Wine Festival, sponsored by the Garden State Winegrowers Association. It's scheduled for the weekend of October 10th and 11th. Held on a grassy field overlooking the Cape May Canal and the Delaware Bay at the Cape May-Lewes Ferry terminal, this two-day fest includes live music, crafters, food, activities for children, and of course, wine. For a tasting fee of \$20, visitors will be able to sample wines from over 25 New Jersey wineries. They can choose from over 275 local and top-quality offerings. Held from noon to 5:00 PM each day, shuttle service is available to and from Victorian Cape May, and parking is also available at the site.

While wineries from all over the state will be participating in the Cape May County Wine Festival, some won't be traveling far at all. All the Cape May County wineries are located within sixteen miles of Cape May. And while sampling their wines at the Festival will certainly be enjoyable, scheduling a visit to these local tasting rooms will provide an even more in-depth opportunity for wine-lovers to get to know our vintners.

### Hawk Haven Vineyard & Winery

The newest of the South Jersey wineries, Hawk Haven opened the doors to its tasting room in May of 2009. But don't let their newness fool you. Owners Todd and Kenna Wuerker have been growing grapes on their family farm for the past twelve years, selling their fruit to other wineries to produce blends.

Self-educated in wine production, Wuerker spent time with several local as well as California wineries. While supportive, the Napa vineyards were incredulous of the notion of New Jersey wineries. "They basically thought we were crazy," said Wuerker, who feels that Hawk Haven is "producing some good quality wines, not just for New Jersey standards."

Visitor Adam Hannan of Philadelphia agrees. "We've been here about an hour or two, and it's been very good," he said. "The wine was very good and reasonably priced. The staff was knowledgeable and attentive and we thought the setting was quaint and comfortable, especially for a family like ours. We like to sit and relax, have fun."

Visit Hawk Haven at 600 South Railroad Avenue in Rio Grande, or on the web at [www.hawkhaven.com](http://www.hawkhaven.com). Wine tastings are available daily from 11:00 AM to 7:00 PM. Check out Sangria Sunday for live music and homemade Sangria every Sunday. Music starts at 4:00 PM and sangria is \$5 a glass.

### Natali Vineyards

Al Natali is an inspiring guy. Growing up on a farm in Gloucester, Natali was the son and grandson of amateur winemakers. As he neared retirement from his position as a network engineer, he pursued a new course - learning about wine agriculture. After attending classes and workshops and finally the University of California Davis Wine School, Natali became a vintner and a winery owner in 2000 when he started Natali Vineyards. Natali was joined by business partners Ray Pensari and Tony Antonelli in 2006.

Motivated partly by nostalgia, Natali also enjoys the connection to his labor. "The real challenge is to make a commercial product that you control from beginning to end, and to not

Merlot grapevines at Natali Vineyards



Bottling mechanism at Cape May Winery & Vineyard



be alienated from your labor,” he said. Though he can no longer take care of the entire vineyard by himself due to the growth of the winery, Natali still personally tends to 20% of the 5,000-plus vines.

Wines here range in price from \$13 to \$22 and include over fifteen varieties. Natali’s favorite? The Dolcetto: a young, fruity, and delicate wine grown in the maritime alps of northwest Italy, near his father’s birthplace. I personally enjoyed the Viognier, a French varietal with a fragrant and aromatic nose of apricots and honeysuckle, compliments of Mr. Natali.

*You can visit Natali Vineyards at 221 North Delsea Drive in Cape May Courthouse, or on the web at [www.natalivineyards.com](http://www.natalivineyards.com). Wine tastings are available daily from 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM from May through September. Fall/winter hours will be posted on their website. Check out the monthly wine events at the vineyard. In October, there will be a fall release event featuring local foods, handcrafted wines, and live music.*

**Cape May Winery and Vineyard**

The Cape May Winery and Vineyard is the most established of the Cape May County wineries. The southernmost New Jersey winery, Cape May Winery opened in 1994 and was taken over by winemakers Darren Hesington and Toby Craig of the Washington Inn in 2003.

*Pictures, top to bottom: Jean Quinn and John Focht of Cape May Winery & Vineyard, Ray Pensari and Kevin Celli of Natali Vineyards and the gorgeous entryway to Hawk Haven Vineyard’s Tasting Room.*



When I visited the Cape May Winery and Vineyard, the large tasting room was packed with wine lovers who had just returned from a tour of the vineyard and the facility. So busy was the tasting room that I couldn’t even meet with the uber-efficient tasting room manager, Stephanie Busa, who entertained customers while providing them with wine samples and information about the vineyard.

The most striking thing about this facility is the tasting deck, a beautiful outdoor seating area positioned to overlook the vineyard. I spoke with customer Stan Sikorski of northern New Jersey as he enjoyed a bottle of wine and picnic there. “We enjoyed it the last time we were here. Not just the wine but the facility itself,” he said.

*Visit the Cape May Winery and Vineyard at 711 Townbank Road in Cape May, or on the web at [www.capemaywinery.com](http://www.capemaywinery.com). Wine tastings are available year round, from noon to 5:00 PM daily, with extended hours from noon to 6:00 PM daily from June through September. Check out the Blending Party Experience where guests can play “winemaker” for the day. Enjoy making your own combination of Cape May Wine with your friends! Reservations are required.*



*Hawk Haven Vineyard*



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New Jersey artist Vincent Filippelli remembers September 11, 2001 in the form of a candleholder he has named “Glowing Tribute”. A limited-edition bronze copy sells at \$150.00 with a percentage of the proceeds going to The New York City Fire Department.

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