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## Winery is a grape adventure *JEFFREY SPIVAK, The Kansas City Star*

It's a Friday afternoon happy hour downtown, and the wine is flowing.

A bottle of Chardonnay is poured around a table. Soon, it's on to a Cabernet. Patrons clink glasses, mingle and enjoy.

Except this is no restaurant. This is at a winery in downtown Kansas City. Yes, an actual winery based downtown, another small sign of downtown's eclectic cultural renaissance.

"We wanted an urban winery," says Michael **Amigoni**, the primary wine-maker. "We are making the wine here. It's all made and processed and produced in Kansas City, as opposed to some rural site."

Indeed, Inland Sea Wines grows grapes near Warrensburg, Mo., then brings them into downtown, where they are crushed and the fermenting and processing is done. Inland Sea bottles three wines and they're available at such retail outlets as Royal Liquors, Red-X and Cellar Rat.

Last Friday, happy hour patrons squeezed into Inland Sea Wines office in the West Bottoms, in the back of the Livestock Exchange Building. They were there for Inland Sea's free weekly taste testing, which occurs every Friday.

Men mostly in khakis, and women wearing bright spring prints, sat with wine glasses at wrought-iron tables flanked by unopened boxes of wine in one corner and a couple of wood barrels with aging wine in another corner.

Sam and Nancy Potter of Weatherby Lake came to try the wines and report back to their local wine-lovers club.

Kerry **Amigoni**, Michael's wife and partner, pours tastes of Chardonnay. The Potters, standing, swirl, sniff and sip. They try the second wine, then the third. By that time, Sam's had enough to form an opinion.

He turns to Kerry. "I've been on all the Missouri wine tours, and I've got to tell you, you've got the best Missouri wine I've ever had. Most of it I won't touch because they sweeten it. You're trying to do something that hasn't been done before."

That's right, in more ways than one.

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It all started in a suburban backyard. Michael **Amigoni** is a second-generation Italian. "Part of my blood is probably in wine," he says. He had wine-making kits in his basement. But he wanted to try doing the real thing, the California-type grapes. So he planted a few rows of vines with Cabernet Sauvignon grapes in his backyard in suburban Leawood.

He was smitten. A few years later, in 2000, he and his wife purchased a former cattle grazing ground in Centerview, Mo. They wanted something in Missouri, because its wine-shipping laws were more favorable than in Kansas, where distribution was then limited to liquor stores. They also wanted something with rolling slopes and underground limestone, which would offer a mix of minerals for the roots of the special grape vine they intended to plant.

What they had in mind was something entirely different than a typical Missouri winery.

Missouri once was the second-largest wine-producing state in the nation. But that ended with Prohibition. Now it has an estimated 74 wineries, most clustered around such hubs as Hermann and Ste. Genevieve.

Missouri vintners have traditionally grown cold-hardy French-American hybrid grapes such as green Seyval and Chardonel, Missouri's attempt at Chardonnay. As a result, Missouri wines have a tendency to be sweet, or in Michael's words, "very offbeat."

A brochure produced by the Missouri Wine & Grape Board, for instance, introduces the red Catawba grape as "a great picnic wine" and the red Concord grape as "America's original dessert wine."

Not exactly Napa Valley, in Michael's opinion.

But he set out to make more California-style wines, such as Chardonnays and Cabernets, from European grapevines known as *Vitis vinifera*. He grows a Dijon, France, clone of Chardonnay, for instance. Such grapes need long hours of sun but they're more susceptible to damage from the cold.

It meant he and his farming crew had to be more vigilant in protecting the plants. So Michael, who doubles as chief operating officer of a small telecommunications call-center company, spends much of his summer weekends in the fields, pruning vines, spraying for fungus, weeding and finally covering the vines to protect them from birds.

"To make better wine, you have to provide more effort," Michael says.

It takes about three years to start producing a crop, as the vines grow to the thickness of a pill bottle. At first, the Amigonis merely sold their grapes to other Missouri wine producers. But after they tasted the wines from their own grapes, they decided to produce on their own. But the question was: Where?

After all, they were not in a traditional wine-making region of the state, meaning they were unlikely to get a lot of traffic.

Kerry happened to work as the real estate manager for the Livestock Exchange Building. One day she was telling building owner Bill Haw about the family's search for a wine-production location. Haw listened and then told her, "Do it here."

She retorted, "But this is an office building."

"We can make it work," he said.

And they have. Of course, it hasn't hurt that, in Kerry's opinion, "our rent's pretty good compared to the Crossroads."

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They started production in 2006. In the beginning, there were plenty of logistical challenges. They crushed grapes in a huge vat on a loading dock behind the building. They pumped the resulting liquid through their first-floor windows into open tanks for fermenting. The city's Health Department didn't know how to treat this operation, and weeks of red tape ensued.

Now the Amigonis have taken on additional warehouse space elsewhere in downtown. But they still age some wine in Missouri-made oak barrels at their West Bottoms location.

One of the things they do is a process called "racking." They pump out the aging wine from one barrel, clean out sediment at the bottom, then pump the wine back in. When that happens, the aroma can waft all the way to the top floors of the nine-story building.

Being downtown has its advantages. It's a hot location these days, here and across the country. Once the Amigonis decided to locate downtown, they learned about a growing trend of what's called "urban wineries," where grapes are shipped to urban production locations, such as around San Francisco. Such locations benefit from being closer to larger numbers of potential buyers.

"Our concept was to bring the wine to the people," Michael says. "We feel this is a lot more accessible."

And so it seems on this particular Friday.

Friends of the Amigonis and strangers who've heard about the budding winery trickle in during the tasting hours. Inland Sea and its companion label, Sea Turtle, offer a Chardonnay, a white Viognier with a fuller bouquet, and a red Cabernet Franc, slightly lighter than a Sauvignon.

One man comes in and buys several bottles. One woman works in the building and likes to stop by some Fridays. "You can definitely smell the fermenting going on," she says.

A group of three ambles in before heading out to First Fridays. One of the men asks Kerry if she has something sweet. "I don't have sweet. I have dry and more dry," she says.

The man settles for the Chardonnay. The three clinks glasses and taste. "Pretty good," the man announces. And he asks for more.

ON THE WEB

For more information about the Amigonis' wines, go to [www.inlandseawines.com](http://www.inlandseawines.com).



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