

Retreat to Southern Illinois Wine Country

A Tranquil Escape or an Outdoor Adventure

By Crystal Hammon

Illinois is so much more than the Magnificent Mile or the rich farmland along interstate highways. Leave your hurried life behind for the tonic of lofty views and bucolic vineyards in the southern part of the Land of Lincoln.

Venture two and a half hours south of Effingham on I-57 and you may find the rebirth and rejuvenation that Wendell Berry speaks of in *An Entrance to the Woods*. In this case, let your renewal be inspired by the Shawnee National Forest, nearly 300 million acres of lush forest and stunning rock formations between the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. This swath, which runs 80 miles east-to-west and 20 miles north-to-south, is a paradise for nature lovers and wine aficionados alike.

Ancient glaciers flattened most of Illinois, but they stopped short of the state's southern tier. That left a rocky region of handsome elevations that can only be classified as miniature mountains, a striking contrast to the flat prairies further north.

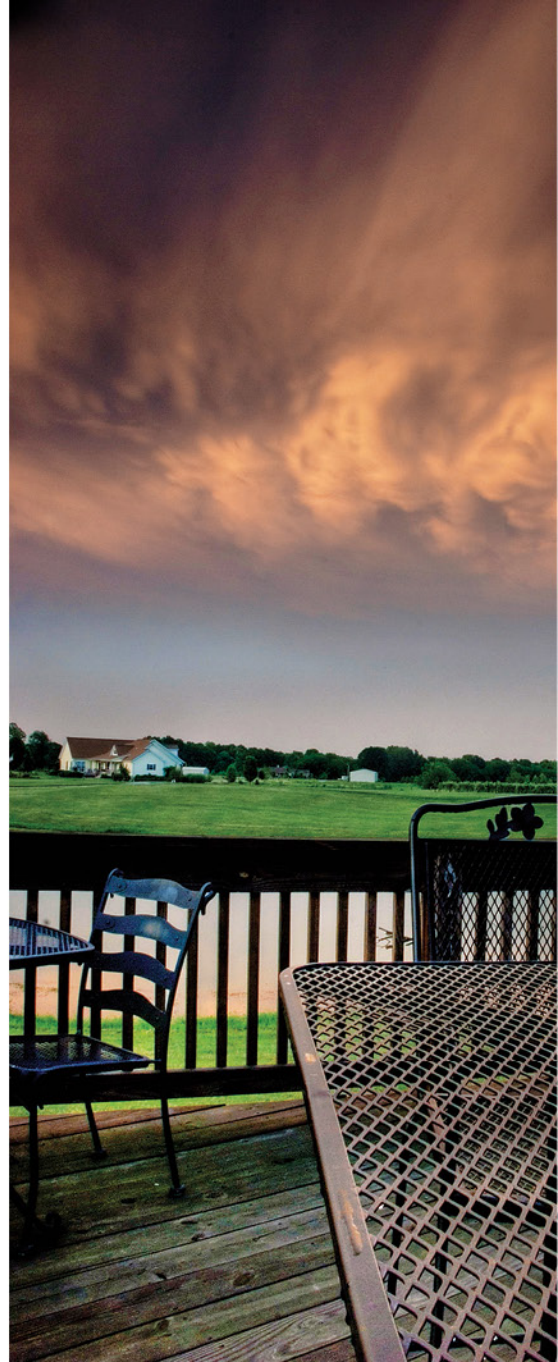
The area is flush with blufftop views from places like Garden of the Gods, known for its natural sandstone sculptures. Ditto for Giant City State Park near Mikanda, Illinois, which offers everything from horseback riding and rock climbing to hiking and camping. It also has a historic lodge with a restaurant where hungry guests scarf fried chicken after their outdoor adventures.

From Giant City State Park take a 35-minute drive to Bald Knob Cross of Peace near Alto Pass, and you'll be standing 1,000 feet above sea level. You can see three states from an observation deck near the majestic 111-foot-tall monument. People from all denominations have been coming together at Bald Knob Cross for sunrise Easter services since 1937. Carry a picnic lunch and eat at the site's covered pavilion, or trek through the adjoining Quetil Walking Trail, an old railroad path

that leads to scenic Cliff View Park.

Bald Knob Cross is located in the middle one of the area's crown jewels, the Shawnee Hills AVA (American Viticultural Area), one of 260 American wine appellations, so designated because of its geographic, geologic and climatic features. Before the Prohibition Act those traits helped make Illinois the nation's fourth largest wine producer. It's nowhere close to that now, but the Illinois wine industry adds \$381 million annually to the state's economy and ranks 18th in the U.S. for wine production, according to a 2019 economic impact study by the Illinois Grape Growers and Vintners Alliance. The 11 vineyards that make up the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail are a winsome part of that mix.

If you're the type of traveler who avoids vacation spots that feel "touristy," this is your magic juju. The Shawnee Hills Wine Trail is a welcoming mecca for anyone who craves genuine hospitality. Its scenic beauty can be savored in every season. "Things tend to green up early here, so spring is a great time to come and see wildflowers blooming or hunt for morels," says Brad Genung, owner of Owl Creek Vineyard.





ABOVE: Kite Hill.

TOP RIGHT: The deck at StarView.

BELOW RIGHT: Deviled Eggs Fork and Vine.

LEFT: Thinning vines at Owl Creek Vineyard.



Genung worked in finance in St. Louis, Missouri before he and his wife bought Owl Creek in 2005 from Ted Wichmann, a visionary who helped restore the region's winemaking tradition during the 1980s and 1990s. The Genung family has expanded with a large tasting room and multiple outdoor decks that allow guests to sip wine and hard ciders on the wooded grounds next to their vineyards. One of the latest Owl Creek innovations is a Chambourcin made from a French-American hybrid grape in bourbon-aged barrels from Kentucky.

The drive along the U-shaped, 35-mile loop in search of the next winery on your list—always with a designated driver—is catnip for urbanites who long for a glimpse of rural life. How many wineries should you hit? Only a few. Which ones? It doesn't matter. Each vineyard has its own personality, its own approach to wine, its own graciousness.

Theresa Smith, a Carmi, Illinois wine lover, visits with her family two to three times a year—spring, summer and fall. "We like to make three stops: one before noon, one at lunch, and one in the afternoon," she says. That tactic introduces many wines without overdoing it, and it preserves time to talk over wine while admiring the bucolic views at each vineyard. If wine doesn't stimulate conversation and a heightened sense of beauty, Smith asks, why bother? Many vineyards host live music in the afternoons and evenings, and her family often plans their last stop around those live performances.

One of Smith's favorite destinations is Kite Hill Vineyards, the only woman-owned winery on the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail. It's known for dry wines, including owner Barbara Bush's personal favorite, Broadwing, a delicious blend of Chardonnay and Viognier. Flyway Rosé is a versatile rosé that pairs with a wide range of foods and consistently wins awards at the state and national level. The Aeronaut is a dry red blend of Chambourcin, Vidal and Rosé of Chambourcin. All three wines are made from grapes grown in the Shawnee Hills AVA.

For people who prefer a sweeter profile, Kite Hill offers sweet and semi-sweet wines. Smith always orders the Kite Hill wine slushie, which is also sold as a mix that can be frozen at home. The quaint tasting room and two-story deck faces Kite Hill's five-acre lake. Linger there and you'll see turtles sunning themselves and the flight of broad-winged hawks, blue herons, and egrets along with an occasional eagle or osprey.

For downloadable maps of the 11 wineries, visit www.shawneewinetrailbb.com/shawneewinetrailmap/

Find a calendar of wine country events, lodging and dining suggestions at www.shawneewinetrail.com.

Learn more about what to do when you're visiting southern Illinois at www.southernmostillinois.com.

Several wineries on the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail offer onsite lodging.

If you like...

Romantic sunsets

Located in Alto Pass, Illinois, Alto Vineyards the area's oldest and most award-winning winery. (They also have a tasting room in Champaign, Illinois.) www.altovineyards.com

Delicious brunches

Visit Fork & Vine Restaurant and Wine Bar, Cobdon, Illinois, known for home-made crepes, served in a variety of styles, from sweet to savory. <https://fork-vine.com>

Relaxing water-side views

Linger on the large deck next to the pond at StarView Vineyards, Cobdon, Illinois. www.starviewvineyards.com