

More than wine

Tart juice from unripened grapes and oil from seeds wooing area chefs

By Emily McFaul
flltimes@flltimes.com

Wine is no longer the only product showcasing Finger Lakes grapes. Two new culinary products, verjuice and grape seed oil, are spicing up the regional culinary scene while keeping vineyard production sustainable.

Verjuice (also known as verjus) is made by pressing unripe grapes to make a tart liquid that can be used in place of citrus or vinegar.

Finger Lakes Food Co. founders Tina Hazlitt and the late Debra Whiting began bottling verjuice several years ago, selling it under the brand name Verjooz. Today, Hazlitt knows of only four other producers making verjuice in the United States — two in California, one in Michigan and one on Long Island.

“It’s been a really slow process educating people on what it is and why they need it,” said Hazlitt, who serves as Finger Lakes Food Co.’s business manager. “Now it’s starting to move.”

Hazlitt dubbed verjuice “lime of the vine,” noting that Europeans, Australians and Middle Eastern cooks have utilized the product for centuries.

“It’s an ancient gourmet culinary ingredient,” she said. “It’s like having a citrus element in an area where citrus doesn’t grow.”

For the Hazlitt family, making verjuice was a way to use the red grapes that would normally be left on the ground at Sawmill Creek Vineyards in Hector as workers thinned the fruit to give the grapes left on the vine a more complex flavor profile.

“Instead of dropping those unripe grapes, we harvested them,” Hazlitt said.

While the grapes used taste quite dif-

ferent, the process of making verjuice is much the same as making wine: Pressing the grapes, and stabilizing, filtering and bottling the finished product. Any type of unripe grape or grape blend can be used to make verjuice, a product that also can be made from crabapples or other sour fruit. For the verjuice produced by Finger Lakes Food Co., Hazlitt chose to use cabernet franc, one of the most versatile varieties to pair with food.

In fact, one of Verjooz’s most appealing traits is its ability to complement a wine selection rather than start a taste-bud war as citrus or vinegar might. Tart and flavorful, some customers have compared verjuice to lemon juice without the afterburn.

“It’s really hard to describe until you taste it,” said Hazlitt, who likes to use

Verjooz in place of lime juice in ceviche and mixed drinks, and even makes a “Verjooz-ade” that has gotten rave reviews.

“It’s refreshing and delicious,” Hazlitt said of the drink.

Verjuice can be substituted in virtually any recipe that calls for lime or lemon juice, and in many cases can be substituted for vinegar. It’s versatile enough to make the leap from savory to sweet, and one of the most memorable dishes Hazlitt has tasted that features verjuice was a “Verjooz Mousse” Whiting made several years ago when she was Red Newt Cellars’ bistro chef.

“It was like eating a bowl of sunshine,” Hazlitt recalled. “It’s like sunshine in your mouth.”

■ See MORE THAN WINE on Page 6



Spencer Tulis / Finger Lakes Times

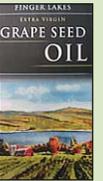
Finger Lakes Grape Seed Oil Caprese Salad

3 large, vine ripe tomatoes (1/4-inch slices)
1 lb, fresh mozzarella cheese (1/4-inch slices)
1/4 cup, Finger Lakes Grape Seed Oil
20-30, fresh basil leaves
Coarsely ground salt and pepper (to taste)

In a circular pattern, alternate slices of tomato, mozzarella and basil leaves. Sprinkle with salt and pepper to taste.

Drizzle the salad with Finger Lakes Grape Seed Oil. Then serve with hearty bread slices, and enjoy!

Feel free to use additional seasonings to enhance and customize the flavor of your Caprese salad. Balsamic vinegar, garlic, oregano are among the seasonings that can go nicely on this salad.



Arugula Salad with Apples, Pumpkin Seeds and Verjuice

4 cups of arugula leaves
1 sprig each dill, parsley and mint
Olive oil, as needed
Verjuice from Red Newt Cellars, as needed
1/4 cup pumpkin seeds
1 small apple, cox pippin or honey crisp
4 ounces of Alpine cheese from Hawthorne Valley Farm
Salt and pepper

In a small bowl combine the pumpkin seeds with one tablespoon of olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Toast the seeds in a 350-degree oven until they are golden and fragrant, about 10 minutes. Remove the stems from the herbs and roughly chop. Combine the arugula leaves and herbs with one to two tablespoons of olive oil. Add a tablespoon of verjuice. Season with salt and freshly cracked black pepper. Add more olive oil and verjuice to taste. Shave curls of Alpine cheese over the greens with a peeler.

Scallop Plum Ceviche

1 pound fresh sea scallops, cut into 1/4- to 1/2-inch dice
2 plums, pitted and cut into 1/4- to 1/2-inch dice
1 to 2 tsp. chopped fresh tarragon, or more to taste
1/4 cup Verjooz
Salt
Pinch cayenne pepper (optional)
Fresh jalapeño finely diced (optional)

In a bowl, toss together scallops, plums, tarragon, jalapeño and verjuice. Season with salt and cayenne. Let mixture sit at room temperature for about 15 minutes. Taste and adjust seasoning.

MORE THAN WINE continued from Page 5

While it's taken a while to build a buzz about the virtues of Verjooz, Hazlitt said that once customers taste it, they're usually hooked.

Many people have searched out Verjooz after trying it in a local restaurant; eateries are Finger Lakes Food Co.'s biggest customers, with Verjooz available in a 3-liter bag-in-a-box for professional chefs.

For home cooks, a 500ml bottle of Verjooz runs about \$13, comparable in price to a decent balsamic vinegar. While it may sound a bit pricey, Hazlitt said locally produced verjuice is actually a great value.

"I sometimes tell people that if you were to buy enough limes to fill a bottle of this size, you'd spend twice as much," she said.

The story is similar for another product just hitting the shelves in the Finger Lakes region: **grapeseed oil**. Produced by Finger Lakes Grape Seed Oil, it can be purchased for \$16 to \$25 per 375ml bottle, depending on whether it is purchased from one of the company's partnering wineries.

"For a lot of people, that is very expensive," CEO Mike Coia said of the product, "but if they look around, they will realize that this is the lowest price, highest-quality grapeseed oil that you can find in the United States."

Producing grapeseed oil is one of the first projects taken on by Finger Lakes Grape Seed Oil's parent company, Seneca Bio Energy — and it's one that lives up to the company's three-pronged philosophy of promoting regional agriculture, renewable energy and environmental sustainability.

"In this millennium, manufacturing has to capitalize on all three of those interrelated components," said Coia, also an environmental engineer.

Because grapes, corn and soy are prolific throughout the Finger Lakes, Coia said Seneca Bio Energy's initial plan was to make biodiesel from the oil that could be harvested as a byproduct from each of these crops.

"As it turns out, grapeseeds are not soybeans," he laughed.

While Coia and his partners successfully developed a process to remove grapeseeds from pomace — the mix of seeds, skins and stems left after grapes are harvested and pressed — getting the pomace to Finger Lakes Grape Seed Oil's processing plant, extracting the seeds, then stabilizing and pressing them is something of an elaborate affair.

The company is essentially on call for vineyard owners, who must rely on the whims of the weather to harvest their fruit. And, after wineries press their grapes, Finger Lakes Grape Seed Oil has about two days to collect the pomace, extract the seeds and dry them to prevent mold from forming.

The tight turnaround time and uncertain conditions mean the company may not be able to utilize pomace from all of the 31 wineries with which it partners. Add to that the fact that only 10 percent of each tiny grapeseed is composed of oil, and it adds up to an expensive product.

"It actually takes a regional facility to make [grapeseed oil production] cost effective," said Coia.

Yet the end product is worth it — an extra virgin, high-quality oil with a smoke point 40 degrees higher than peanut oil, so chefs can use grapeseed oil in situations where olive oil would burn. Testing at Cornell University's New York State Food Venture Center has also confirmed that grapeseed oil is low in harmful trans fats and high in antioxidants.

Grapevines under stress — for instance, a summer drought or a cold snap — secrete a substance called resveratrol, a compound being studied for its role in cardiovascular health and cancer prevention. The substance is ultimately passed along to all parts of the fruit produced by the vine, including the seed and the oil it contains.

"Everything the grape has, the oil has," Coia confirmed.

Like verjuice, grapeseed oil is a product that Europeans have been using for some time but which Americans are just beginning to discover. Still, Coia said he is heartened by the fact that while Finger Lakes Grape Seed Oil has been



Submitted photos

Unripe grapes are harvested at Sawmill Creek Vineyards for verjuice production.

Park — named one of 10 transformative economic development projects in the region by the Finger Lakes Economic Development Council.

Next on the company's agenda for Finger Lakes grapes is developing a means to produce and market grape-seed extract, made from the seed meal remaining after the oil is extracted. Grapeseed extract also contains resveratrol, and it's fast becoming a desired ingredient for nutritional supplements, lotions and exfoliants.

"The power of the grape goes much beyond the wine that we drink and the oil that people can consume," said Coia. "It goes to the stem and the seed."

While the applications of grapeseed extract are still being studied, Coia believes demand for the product will continue to grow over time ... that's good news for the future of sustainable agriculture in the Finger Lakes.

"It's just one added vertically integrated product that we can get out of our region," Coia noted.

Verjooz can be purchased at the New York Wine and Culinary Center or ordered online at www.verjooz.com. It's also available at regional winery tasting rooms, and at www.fingerlakesgrapeseedoil.com.

Grapeseed oil can also be purchased at www.fingerlakesgrapeseedoil.com, where recipes and more product information can be found. Grapeseed oil can also be sampled and purchased at approximately 50 retail locations throughout the Finger Lakes; for a listing, visit the website or Finger Lakes Grape Seed Oil's Facebook or Twitter pages.

on the market for only a few months, local chefs are already jumping on the bandwagon.

For example, grapeseed oil is a featured ingredient at eateries like the Hotel Clarence in Seneca Falls and the Sherwood Inn in Skaneateles, while The Union Block at Esperanza Mansion on Keuka Lake sets the oil out, alongside balsamic vinegar, for use on its tables.

Regional fine-dining establishments are a good way to spread the word about grapeseed oil to home chefs who take pride in their food, Coia said. He likes to use the oil for sautéing vegetables like asparagus and broccoli, rubbing it on a salmon steak to prepare it for the grill or using it in dipping sauces or dressings.

"People who are 'foodies' have found a lot of parallels with extra virgin olive oil," Coia said of grapeseed oil. "The trend is now for them to discover ways they can achieve a slightly different finish for a dish by using grapeseed oil instead."

Producing grapeseed oil is just one small facet of Seneca Bio Energy's vision, which is working on a plan to fully develop nearly 10 acres of manufacturing space in two revitalized buildings at the Seneca AgBio Green Energy

Abigails

Over 25 Years Serving The Finger Lakes!

Lunch Mon. - Fri. 11AM - 2PM
Large Menu Plus Our
"All You Can Eat" Deli Bar Buffet

Simply Saturday Lunch 11-3

Dinner Nightly from 5PM
Sundays from 1PM

(COUPON)

TAKE \$5 OFF
any 2 DINNER ENTREES

TAKE \$3 OFF
any 2 LUNCH ENTREES

Not valid on discounted specials Not valid Thanksgiving Day.
Expires November 30, 2012

Rts. 5&20, Waterloo
315-539-9300

Sit Inside Or On Our Deck
Overlooking The Seneca Canal

Come On In, Your Table Is Waiting