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**AUTHOR’S NOTE**

*Expedition of Thirst* involved more than 1,500 miles of travel across the prairie and Flint Hills of eastern Kansas and the rolling hills, plains, and Ozarks region of western Missouri. Highway and winding country roads lead past a parade of natural beauty. The landscape between each point offers a rich kaleidoscope of seasonal imagery. En route to these regional breweries, wineries, and distilleries, look out the window and admire the hills, valleys, bluffs, farm ponds, quiet Main Streets, and busy cityscapes.

This travel guidebook explores 150 destinations in eastern Kansas and western Missouri. Few relevant businesses exist in the western half of Kansas; meanwhile, coverage of the eastern half of Missouri’s breweries, wineries, and distilleries would significantly expand the scope of the book beyond its original premise. Besides, my liver can only handle so much research.

The routes covered on this expedition follow major interstates, highways, and roads in the territory. The entries in this guide list businesses on or near these routes. No assumptions are made about the point of departure. To organize listings in each section, business entries on routes that pass through Kansas City, for example, begin there and proceed outbound. Entries along I-70 West run from Kansas City to Hays, Kansas, along I-70 East from Kansas City to Columbia, Missouri, along I-35 South toward Wichita, Kansas, and along US 24 to its easternmost point.

Each entry is an introduction to the owners and artisans, a sense of the place, and highlights on beer, wine, and spirits. Expeditionary notes on local history, culture, and personalities are woven through these entries. Hopefully, these observations add layers of interest for travelers on the road and readers curled up at home with this book, thirsty for knowledge.
It’s the twenty-first century. GPS-based applications on mobile devices are common and (mostly) reliable tools used to navigate in the city, suburbs, and country. For practical purposes, detailed maps of destinations and specific geographic areas are not listed in this guidebook. Directions are included for listings in some rural areas as well as locations that merit specific detail. If GPS or wifi is inaccessible, make a quick phone call. Let the business know you’re coming, and ask for directions. More often than not, you’ll be speaking with the owner. These locally owned breweries, wineries, and distilleries are family-run businesses—they look forward to your visit and value your patronage.

Ask questions on your travels. Learn about the grapes in the vineyard, the hops and malts used in brewing, and the method used in distilling. It’s interesting to learn how each business operates and how each applies its craft. Sampling at the taproom or tasting room is only one way to learn through the senses. The brewer, vintner, distiller, tour guide, or friendly face at the bar is usually happy to share details about how the beer, wine, and spirits are made.

Have fun on your expedition. Drink responsibly. Know your limits. Respect the judgment of the person pouring behind the bar. Bring home souvenirs and stories and enjoy the exploration.

If you see me on your travels, don’t be a stranger.

Pete Dulin
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Kim Hogeland, acquisitions editor at the University Press of Kansas. Expedition of Thirst was a great book concept. It’s also been a grand adventure.

A salute goes to my trusty red Ford Focus. I literally couldn’t have completed this expedition and written this book without my car. In fact, one night I resorted to sleeping under a fuzzy blue blanket in the Focus. By the way, never assume there won’t be four conventions at the same time in Springfield, Missouri, that will sell out every hotel and motel room. Remember to make advance reservations.

Thank you to the many people I met at regional breweries, wineries, and distilleries who answered my questions, poured samples, and showed midwestern hospitality. My gratitude goes to Margaret and Dick Burkhalter and longtime friend Jim Miles for opening their homes to me while I was on the road.

Years ago, I traveled with my uncle Mike Wagner and aunt Tawee Wagner in the back seat of their car through northern California. We drove past a vineyard lined with grapes in the heat of summer. Being an instigator of antics, Mike stopped the car and encouraged me to run to the vines and grab a bunch of grapes. Old enough to know better but young enough to obey my elder, I stepped out of the car, dashed across the dusty road, and quickly grabbed what I could with both hands. As I ran back to the car, Mike began pulling away. Tawee shouted, “Go, go, go!” I dove through the open rear door into the back seat. Catching my breath, I looked at the haul of mostly grape leaves and a small cluster of grapes. Sure enough, they were unripe and sour. That experience ended my career as a grape thief, but it wasn’t the last of my adventures. Thanks, Mike and Tawee.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.—Mark Twain

Expedition of Thirst is a guide and an account of travels to other places, people, and their craft. Spanning the eastern half of Kansas and western half of Missouri, the exploration covers the crafts of brewing, winemaking, and distilling. To seek, find, and sample the handiwork of the makers is the most fundamental point. As a journey of purpose, the expedition goes beyond quenching thirst by sipping wine, imbibing whiskey, or quaffing beer. Traveling also satisfies a thirst for knowledge and adventure. Heading across the Midwest, the opportunity to learn and expand views transcends the page and inhabits personal experience. Each mile waiting to be traversed is an invitation. Expedition of Thirst begins a quest to understand how place, people, and craft are interconnected.

Above Ancient Seas
Bob DesRuisseaux stands on the edge of a grassy bluff. He studies rows of grapevines that lead toward Prairie Fire Winery. He owns and operates the business with his wife Julie on Bacchus Ranch in Paxico, Kansas, in Wabaunsee County. DesRuisseaux wears a tan long-sleeved shirt, worn blue jeans, and a broad-brimmed hat that shades his eyes from late afternoon sun. Behind us, the bluff
slopes toward Hudson Ranch Road and Interstate 70 in the distance. Westbound traffic heads toward Manhattan, located deeper in the Flint Hills. Automobiles and semitrailers headed east will pass through Topeka in roughly twenty minutes before reaching Lawrence and Kansas City. The sound of highway traffic never reaches our ears.

A stout winemaker with silvery hair and a broad smile, DesRuisseaux provides an impromptu overview of the landscape. He gestures toward Buffalo Mound, a 1,270-foot mountain peak in the distance, and other surrounding ridges. Prairie Fire’s vineyard of Chambourcin, Vignoles, and other varieties grows on a high ridge. Wind flows in patterns through specific contours of his acreage that differ from adjoining ridges and valleys. Cool wind complements blankets of sunlight throughout the seasons. Grapevine-laden hills maintain a temperature seven to eight degrees warmer than adjacent slopes. This geospecific overlay of wind, sun, and soil creates a microclimate on southeast slopes that infuses character into Prairie Fire’s wines.

We walk downhill to the tasting room. DesRuisseaux names wildflowers such as blue false indigo and primrose. He explains how prairie grasses form root systems eight to ten feet deep. These roots are the foundation to growth in these lands. Annual controlled prairie fires cull weeds and invasive species, fostering the growth of native grass in a timeless cycle. The root system and rocky soil beneath the grassy slopes provide good drainage for grapevines that “don’t like their feet wet.” Much like native grass, grapevines push into the earth and seek rich nutrients deposited from an ancient seabed.

Glancing at the boundless sky, swell of the Flint Hills, and sweep of the plains, it is bewildering and captivating to realize that much of Kansas and vast swaths of the central and upper Midwest were once inundated by the Western Interior Sea. A shallow sea up to nine hundred meters deep covered the middle third of North America during the late Cretaceous period about one hundred million years ago. The central lowlands of Kansas and its neighboring states once formed the bottom of this sea. The former presence of ancient waters and its remnants still defines this place and what grows here and throughout the Midwest.

DesRuisseaux bends and picks up one of the many hefty rocks that will be cleared from a hillside as more grapevines are planted in coming seasons. The rock in his hands—as are those in a larger collection behind the tasting room—is studded with the fossils of seashells and creatures of the sea. Flint, limestone, and deposits of fossils and minerals left behind hundreds of millions of years ago continue to enrich the soil that feeds native flora and grapevines introduced to the region.

The conversation with DesRuisseaux offers insight into the livelihood of grape-
INTRODUCTION

growers and winemakers throughout Kansas and Missouri. Not all grapegrowers are winemakers, and vice versa, but they are innately connected to what story the land has to tell in Kansas and Missouri. That story begins with rocks, minerals, and soil, the sculpture of geography subject to the timeless dance of weather patterns and the agricultural ministration of human hands. The grapegrower is attuned to the cycle of planting, caretaking, and harvest. The winemaker applies craft and skill to divine the potential of grapes sourced from the vineyard. Producing wine involves the vintner’s intuition, experience, and application of science, but it all begins with stewardship of the land.

Of Oak and Clay

To the east, several ancient seas submerged much of Missouri’s landscape during separate geological periods. The Absaroka Sea covered vast areas of the state, particularly the northern half known as the glaciated till plain, and southwest near the Mississippi Highlands along the state’s bootheel. The Absaroka Sea rose
and regressed five times in the state before it subsided during the Pennsylvanian period about 320 million years ago. The Ozark Mountains rose above the waters as part of the Appalachian land mass that extended toward the eastern seaboard.

Long gone are the glaciers that tilled the Midwest and the briny waters that formed an expansive watershed between the Rockies and Appalachians. Left behind are rich, varied strata of limestone, sandstone, silt, shale, clay, granite, and other rocks. What is the connection between these rock-strewn remnants of a bygone sea and beer, wine, and spirits produced in Kansas and Missouri? The answer involves Missouri white oak and clay of the region.

The majority of American oak barrels used in the beer, wine, and spirits industry are made from Missouri white oak sourced from the Ozarks region. Compared to more porous red oak, the wood cells of white oak trees contain a plasticlike sealing substance called tylose. This substance makes the wood waterproof and increases resistance to rot and decay.

Missouri white oak has been the preferred wood for modern barrels that store beer, wine, and spirits in the United States for more than a hundred years. This preference holds true for winemakers in California and Kansas, spirit houses in Kentucky and Missouri, and breweries barrel aging beer in Portland, Wichita, and Kansas City. Accordingly, several of the nation’s most prolific cooperages are based in central Missouri. One man in particular helped to launch Missouri’s barrel-making industry.

Thomas Walton Boswell founded T. W. Boswell Stave Company in 1912 to produce white oak barrels from staves—vertical wooden planks. Tough Missouri mules hauled logs from the Ozark forests to the mill. By the 1920s Boswell owned and brokered production for thirty-six stave and sawmill operations across southern and midwestern states. Boswell’s son J. E. renamed the company in 1936 as Independent Stave Company and renovated its plant in Lebanon, Missouri. Missouri cooperages continue to lead the industry, working with breweries, wineries, and distilleries around the world.

In addition to the structural integrity of oak barrels, the wood affects the flavor and aroma of the liquid it contacts. The cellular structure of white oak permits small amounts of oxygen to permeate barrel staves and diffuse its contents. Chemical reactions help soften tannins from wood and stabilize the liquid’s color. Curing oak before barrel construction also imparts aroma and flavor.

Andy Rieger and Ryan Maybee are cofounders of Kansas City–based J. Rieger & Co. Head distiller Nathan Perry produces the distillery’s vodka, gin, whiskey, and other spirits. The fifty-three-gallon barrels that store whiskey in their East Bottoms facility are made from Missouri white oak. Approximately 1,400 barrels rest on racks as the whiskey ages.
According to Rieger, the distillery’s barrels are made from wood that has been seasoned for a period of twenty-four to sixty months after the staves are cut to shape and prior to the barrel being built. Toasting and charring barrel staves also introduce a range of flavors and affects the mouthfeel of the spirit. Exposure to heat converts compounds in the wood and coaxes out aromas such as vanilla, caramel, nut, and smoke.

Rieger pointed out that Missouri’s soil has a high clay concentration. Clay is abundant in Ozark soil where forests of white oak are found. That dense clay is packed with nutrients—a result of age-old seas and geological forces transforming layers of earth. Rieger added that white oaks grow slowly in clay-rich soil and gradually absorb nutrients. The oak trees grow stronger and high in compounds that impart great flavor to alcohols when aged properly over several years. As a storage container, a white oak barrel and its liquid contents are connected to the land and a particular place that imparts character as part of the distiller’s craft.

**Water and Chemistry**

Sometime in the 1850s, Kentucky businessman Ben Holladay settled in Weston, Missouri, thirty-three miles northwest of Kansas City. He saw opportunity in a limestone spring that had been discovered decades earlier by explorers Lewis
and Clark. Ben and his brother David Holladay opened Holladay Distillery in 1856 near the spring. The spring’s mineral-infused waters were ideal to use in the mash that produced bourbon similar to the spirits in Holladay’s home state. After the bourbon aged, fresh limestone spring water was added to it to dilute the bourbon and bring it to a desirable proof for bottling. Fresh spring water is still used in this time-tested process to produce Holladay’s bourbon.

Similarly, Copper Run Distillery in Walnut Shade, Missouri, also benefits from close access to natural limestone-rich water in the Ozarks that directly affects the quality of its spirits. Limestone is loaded with calcium-bearing carbonate minerals. Water from a limestone spring is rich in minerals, such as calcium, and has a high pH, which promotes fermentation. Most importantly, the limestone filters out impurities such as iron that can cause whiskey to have a bitter taste.

A distillery’s water source and its quality play an integral role in the chemistry involved with producing spirits. Historically, breweries in Germany, England, and Belgium also chose locations with access to abundant water that bore qualities well suited to brewing specific styles of beer. Modern brewers assess water
quality reports to determine optimum sites and how best to treat water for brewing. In fact, the founders of Tallgrass Brewing Company in Manhattan, Kansas, and Walnut River Brewing in El Dorado, Kansas, chose locations in part due to the purity and qualities of local water.

Throughout the Midwest, the natural resources of a place play a key role in the time-tested methods used by makers of beer, wine, and spirits. Yet land, sun, and water alone are not enough to create these beverages. Practitioners of the craft matter as well.

**Immigrants Produce Wine in the New World**

Wild varieties of grapes such as Catawba, Concord, and Norton have long grown along riverways and the surrounding lands of Kansas and Missouri. In 1724, American Indian tribes supplied French explorer Captain Etienne Venyard de Bourgmont with wild grapes. His party ventured beyond the Missouri and Kansas Rivers into what is now the northeastern corner of Kansas. Eight decades later, Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and their Corps of Discovery encoun-
tered vast quantities of grapes growing along Missouri River banks below the bluffs. Despite the abundance of grapes, the origins of the wine industry in these territories only began with the migration of Germans to the area.

German immigrants sought a “new Rhineland” where they could grow grapes, produce wine, and raise families in America. In Missouri, German immigrants settled in Saint Louis and founded towns such as Hermann. Others traveled south to what are now designated as the Ozark Mountain and Ozark Highland wine regions. Throughout the mid- to late 1800s, Germans and other immigrants continued west on the Missouri River or by land. Their destination was the frontier town on the Missouri River that became Kansas City, the arid territory that became Kansas, and beyond. Settlers established farms and vineyards in river valleys and on hot, sunny plains. Winemaking grew beyond its tether to the farm’s vineyard and became a commercial industry.

In A History of Wine in America, author Thomas Pinney notes that German brothers Adam and Jacob Brenner migrated to Kansas in the 1860s and settled in the northeastern corner of the state. Winding curves of the Missouri River...
bound the edge of Doniphan County and deviate from the state’s otherwise rectilinear borders. Riverbanks and nearby lands provided a rich supply of native grapes. Jacob planted Central Vineyards in 1864, followed a year later by his brother establishing Doniphan Vineyards. In 1869 Jacob’s son George planted Bellevue Vineyards adjacent to the vineyards of his father and uncle. The vineyards grew native grapes and domestic varieties from other states. By 1883 the combined vineyards totaled more than one hundred acres of vines and were capable of producing more than sixty thousand gallons annually. Unfortunately, the Missouri River flooded the town of Doniphan in 1890 and contributed to the demise of the town and vineyards.

Elsewhere, Frenchman Isador Labarriere grew grapes and produced wine in the 1870s in Douglas County, Kansas. In Miami County, Swiss immigrant John Ulrich “Wine” Smith and his wife Martha moved from Ohio to Kansas City, relocated to Ellsworth, Kansas, and finally settled in Paola to establish prolific vineyards and produce wine. According to records in 1873 from the Kansas State Board of Agriculture, vineyards were established in fifty counties in the state. Production accounted for 35,000 gallons. By 1880, Kansas wineries produced a whopping 226,000 gallons of wine.

By the mid-1880s Missouri produced more wine by volume than any other state. The bulk of the wine production was along the Mississippi River Valley around Saint Louis and in the Ozarks region. Before Prohibition went into effect in 1920, Missouri was the second-largest wine-producing state in the nation. Along with native Catawba, Concord, and Norton grapes, hybrids such as Vignoles, Seyval, and Chambourcin were added to vineyards and flourished.

Winemaking and its sister industries of distilling and brewing first began in the Midwest with the bounty of land and water in Kansas and Missouri. Yet these industries would not have flourished without the labor, skill, technological advances, and vision of the first generations of Americans. A nation of immigrants and colonists became pioneers, westbound migrants, settlers, farmers, skilled artisans, and architects of agriculture-based industries.

Reconstitution
Several people in Missouri’s wine industry played key roles in saving Europe’s wine industry in the nineteenth century. In the mid-1800s, a deadly infestation began to devastate vineyards in France and other countries. French botanist Jules Emile Planchon theorized that phylloxera, a tiny aphidlike insect that feeds on roots of *Vitis vinifera* grapes, was the cause of the blight. *Vitis vinifera* grapes produce most of the world’s best-known wine varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, and Sauvignon Blanc. At the time, these grapes weren’t
commercially grown in the Midwest. The vines couldn’t withstand the cold climate and seasonal temperature changes in fall and winter.

Charles Valentine Riley, Missouri’s state entomologist and leading expert on phylloxera, confirmed Planchon’s theory. French grapegrowers Leo Laliman and Gaston Bazille suggested a possible solution: if European *Vitis vinifera* could be grafted with aphid-resistant American vines, then the problem might be solved. Viticulturist Thomas Volney Munson, who devoted much of his career to collecting and documenting native American grape species and bred new varieties from them, was consulted about the proposed solution. He then provided native Texan rootstocks for grafting tests that confirmed the solution.

Afterward, Missouri growers and nurserymen George Hussman of Bluffton, Austrian-born Isidor Bush of Saint Louis, and Hermann Jaeger from Newtown County, a trained Swiss viticulturist living in the Ozarks, led the effort to furnish massive volumes of rootstocks and cuttings. These American grapevines enabled the French to reconstitute their afflicted vineyards, an effort known as the “Reconstitution.”

**Temperance and Intolerance**

Despite burgeoning wine production in the mid- to late 1800s, intolerant moral and political opponents of alcohol in Kansas weren’t so enamored by the industry. Opposition to the production, sale, and consumption of alcohol in Kansas has roots dating back to the 1830s. Steadily, new laws were passed over several decades as communities took a more restrictive stance.

The temperance movement, led in Kansas by fierce, hatchet-wielding Carrie Nation, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and other groups, gained steam in municipalities after the Civil War and into the mid-1870s. Temperance strangled the growth of alcohol production and sales across the nation. The momentum of Kansas winemakers as well as brewers came to an abrupt halt when Kansas became a “dry state.”

In 1880 Kansas voters approved an amendment to the state constitution that prohibited the manufacture and sale of intoxicating liquors statewide, effective on January 1, 1881. Kansas was the first state in the nation to enact such a prohibition on alcohol. This statewide ban preceded national Prohibition by forty years.

From the early 1800s until the onset of Prohibition, brewers, winemakers, and distillers continued to operate and prosper in Missouri. In fact, some entrepreneurs relocated to the Show-Me State from Kansas. For example, brewer John Walruff moved his business from Lawrence to Weston. Post-Prohibition, these industries quickly returned and ramped up operations in Missouri.
parity in growth, density of alcohol-manufacturing businesses, and volume produced between Kansas and Missouri continues to the present day.

More than a century would pass before it became legal again to manufacture alcohol in Kansas. The formation of the Kansas Grape Growers and Winemakers Association in 1987 helped to represent industry interests on legislative issues. Changes in the state’s laws also opened doors for the wine and distilling industries in Kansas.

Chuck Magerl, founder of Free State Brewing Company in Lawrence, Kansas, was the modern pioneer who initiated efforts with state lawmakers to update and amend the Kansas State Constitution. Once it was legal, Magerl took a risk by opening his brewery in 1989 and subsequently launched a brewing renaissance in the state.

**Bearing Witness**

The word *craft* is often overused and misused, much like *artisan, local,* and *organic.* These words have value but can lose their currency as meaningful terms. *Craft* implies that something is handmade with skill in small-scale production. That applies equally to a local winemaker’s semisweet Vidal Blanc with citrus aroma and pineapple notes and to the brewer’s coffee stout.

Not all wine, beer, and spirits on the market are produced in the small-batch sense of craft. Seeing the vineyard, brewhouse, or pot still in person can underscore the authenticity and value of the craft and its maker. Asking questions...
Taking an expedition to meet the makers is an opportunity to behold, understand, and support their craft. We bring ourselves closer to the origins of stories told by winemakers, distillers, and brewers through the voice of agriculture and industry. Terroir is its regional accent and the maker’s craft is its patois. To travel and be present in their tasting rooms, tours, and taprooms is to bear witness to their stories and labors.

Visiting these businesses slakes the thirst for knowing more and gaining experience through adventure. Talking and tasting firsthand helps to broaden the senses and expand the palate. Or it simply confirms preferences. After all, winemakers are fond of the phrase “Drink what you like. Like what you drink.”

The men and women presented in these expedition notes uphold traditions of craft that predate the existence of the United States itself. They follow in the footsteps of others who drew from the resources of eastern Kansas and western Missouri lands. Each bottle and pour passes along a distant message and cultural lineage from the past. These makers also update traditions and advance the craft with modern ideas, techniques, and technology.

Free State Brewing founder Chuck Magerl (left) and former head brewer Steve Bradt. Magerl’s brewery in Lawrence was the first to open in Kansas, post-Prohibition, in more than a century. Photo by the author.

also sheds insight on the differences between their operation and factory-scale producers.
INTRODUCTION

Local Brings Us to This Place
You can’t get it just anywhere. That statement proposes a reason for why we eat and drink as local residents do when we travel. There’s something about the exclusivity of food or drink tied to a place that has great appeal. The notion seems almost quaint in a time when on-demand products and services appease our whims. The scarcity or inaccessibility of a great seasonal beer or limited vintage of wine makes it all the more desirable.

Yet being local or hard to obtain shouldn’t be the only criterion.
John McDonald, founder of Boulevard Brewing Company, once said, “You don’t support local because it is local, but because it is good.” If it isn’t good, then why seek it out? Of course, good—not to be confused with quality, which may be measured and tested against criteria—is a matter of taste and preference. Again, drink what you like and like what you drink.

There
Travel is more than the sum of consuming, documenting, and rating another place. There matters. The sights seen. The people who live and work in a place unlike home are part of the experience. Discovering the similarities and differ-
ences, the familiar and strange, is an opportunity to take the measure of what exists elsewhere. In doing so, travel prompts self-reflection about our willingness to risk, the value of creature comforts, and the identity of the people and place we left.

We can traverse great distances by jet, ship, and automobile, or virtually by accessing distant places via the internet. Too often we fixate on the exotic locale and overlook the richness of local treasures. Expedition of Thirst presents 150 reasons to change that tendency.

When traveling, we’re open to a different rhythm and the newness of people, sights, and experiences. We physically move our bodies from home to another place miles away. There’s an exchange of molecules and energy across time and space. We’re interacting and immersed. No matter how modern travel has become, it is this process of seeking, finding, and connecting in person that is the underpinning of discovery. Bonding over a glass of wine, a sip of spirits, or a pint of beer taps makes the adventure even more memorable.

The road awaits.

Guests enjoy craft beer made with farm-sourced ingredients at Miami Creek Brewing Company’s taproom in Drexel, Missouri. Photo by the author.