

# LAKE MICHIGAN VINTNERS

– Lake Michigan College has commercial teaching winery and wine/grape degree program  
by Patrick Dunn



LMC grad Emily Dockery, Project & Marketing Director, Michigan Wine Collaborative

Having recently kicked off the fifth year of Lake Michigan College's (LMC) wine and viticulture technology program, Michael Moyer says southwest Michigan's wine industry is "just hitting the tip of the iceberg in terms of what is possible."

Moyer is the Benton Harbor-based community college's director of wine and viticulture technology. He relocated from Walla Walla, Washington, to Michigan in 2014 to establish LMC's commercial teaching winery, Lake Michigan Vintners, and its associate's degree program in wine and viticulture technology.

The program has seen steady interest since then, with about 12 students enrolling per academic year. That number increased to just under 20 students for the 2019-2020 academic year, thanks in part to the recent opening of the Welch Center, a \$7 million, 14,000-square-foot teaching winery on LMC's campus.

Although the program includes classes in both viticulture and enology, Moyer notes that it's "just not possible" to develop "a strong scientific background" in winemaking in just two years. So he's structured the program to emphasize a practical, hands-on approach to the business of wine, inspired somewhat by his own experience in the industry. Moyer has a master's degree in viticulture and enology from the University of California, Davis.

"I have placed a high value on that degree, and I'm grateful for it and everything I've learned," Moyer says. "But there are some things in the wine business that you have to learn on the job, particularly the business part."

That approach has had great benefit for many LMC students. Moyer rattles off a list of wineries, both in Michigan and across the country, where his grads now work.

The program has also proven immensely helpful to some Michiganders who are already established in the wine industry – like Adam McBride, owner and winemaker at Buchanan-based Hickory Creek Winery.

McBride started by taking just a single class at LMC in 2018. He says "one thing led to another" and he ended up taking nearly half the classes required to complete the program before he realized he might as well just finish it. He's now set to graduate in spring next year. He says the program has helped him build new industry connections and taken his existing knowledge to the "next level."

"You know what to do and you know how to do it, but through these courses, I'm learning the why of why we're doing things," McBride says.

The program has also had noticeable effects on the Michigan wine industry's talent pool.

Dave Miller, president of the Michigan Wine Collaborative and a member of the advisory committee for the LMC program, says he's hired students out of the program and knows others who have done the same. He says finding knowledgeable staffers can often present a "chicken and egg" problem for those starting up a new winery, but LMC is helping to address it.

"That's a really positive impact already, even though the program's only been there five years," Miller says.

Moyer says the Welch Center's opening is a "game-changer" for the program. Its teaching winery previously operated out of what he describes as a "cramped" space at LMC's Mendel Center, where he says faculty and students "struggled to make a very small amount of wine." By contrast, he says the custom-built Welch Center is "fantastic."

"We were able to build a building that works like a winery is supposed to work," he says. "It's a great space to make wine in."

Moyer hopes the center's opening will catalyze further growth in the Michigan wine industry in general. He notes that there's still plenty of room for expansion, with relatively affordable land prices creating a low barrier to entry.

"We have some great terroir here in southwest Michigan that we need to capitalize on and we need to develop and take our industry to the next level," he says. "We're hoping that our program helps move that along."

Miller agrees, noting that Michigan wine industry leaders are "really excited" about the "huge investment" LMC has made in its wine and viticulture technology program.

"That sends a message to folks region-wide that this is a viable, happening wine region and it's growing," he says. "This facility fills a need and it's definitely going to help with the growth of the industry."

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Welch Center at LMC

