

## SHOW-ME LIFESTYLE

# Legend of Hermann Jaeger

By MARK PARKER

Jaeger, work with God making better grapes.”

The gravity of that declaration by Hermann Jaeger foretold the impact one of Missouri's most historic agriculturalists would have on the world of wine.

Born in 1844 in Switzerland, Jaeger emigrated to the United States in 1865 at the close of the Civil War, settling in the Monark Springs area just east of Neosho. Searching Oklahoma and Texas, as well as Missouri, the young vintner gathered native grape stock and, in 1867, planted his first vines that would ultimately yield more than 100 different varieties.

Jaeger particularly appreciated the Neosho area's wild “possum” grapes for their resistance to mildew. Crossed with stock from Virginia, the hardy Ozarks vines offered a disease-resistance package any modern farmer could appreciate, as well as the winemaking qualities Jaeger sought.

## Historic impacts

Along the way, Jaeger met and shared information with a young George Washington Carver and became the first grower in the Western world to spray for fungal diseases. One of his varieties, Jaeger 70, is an ancestor of many



## Key Points

- Missouri wine pioneer helped save the French wine industry.
- Wild Ozarks “possum” grapes provided disease resistance.
- Mystery lingers over Hermann Jaeger's disappearance.

modern hybrids.

While Jaeger's southwest Missouri accomplishments are more than noteworthy, it was his impact on the wine industry more than 4,000 miles away that earned him a place in history.

The French had begun importing Norton/Cynthiana rootstock from America after Missouri wines took a shocking eight of 12 medals at the 1851 Vienna World's Fair.

That effort to keep up with Missouri wine was very nearly their undoing because the rootstock carried with it a pest that would wreak havoc throughout the renowned French vineyards. In

France, and across much of Europe's wine country, a plague of phylloxera root louse ravaged vineyards. By 1880, the French vines were on the edge of total decimation.

Jaeger was already experienced at grafting vines for disease resistance, and working with Missouri state entomologist George Hussman, the Ozarks winemaker gathered and shipped 17 boxcars of hardy, phylloxera root louse-resistant rootstock to France.

It worked. The French wine industry was saved and Jaeger was a hero. For his efforts, he received a knighthood and the French Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor, the highest civilian award in France. Today, a statue commemorating the salvation of the French wine industry still stands at the agricultural college in Montpellier, France.

Hussman went on to help rescue the California wine industry from the same fate as the French, although the Californians chose to import resistant rootstock from France rather than have to claim a Missouri connection.

## Turn of events

For Jaeger, however, international acclaim was not enough to save him from local problems. In the 1890s, well ahead of Prohibition, Newton County passed a law against the sale of “spirits.” The Jaeger family reportedly attempted to skirt the ordinance by selling German cookies and pastries — along with a free glass of wine with which to wash them down.

Nevertheless, Jaeger was indicted and, amid his legal woes, decided to sell



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NEWTON COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM

**WINE LEGEND:** Hermann Jaeger, one of Missouri's most celebrated agriculturalists and vintners, lived in notoriety and disappeared in mystery.

the Neosho vineyard and purchase land near Joplin where he intended to grow fruit and establish a new vineyard.

But on May 16, 1895, Jaeger disappeared. He had left the Joplin farm, kissing his daughters goodbye and telling his wife he was traveling to Neosho to deal with legal issues.

That was the last time Jaeger's family ever saw him. Some days later, his wife received a letter postmarked in Kansas City. Written in German, the note said, “When you read these lines I will be alive no more.” The letter suggested that Jaeger intended to end his life in such a manner that he would never be found, and it was signed, “Your unlucky Hermann.”

And Hermann Jaeger, the Missouri man who saved the French wine industry, was never seen nor heard from again.

*Parker writes from Parsons, Kan.*

## Missouri's wine industry stages comeback by utilizing tourism trade

TODAY'S Missouri wine industry isn't what it was 100 years ago when 2 million gallons of the state's vintage poured out into glasses around the world.

Stick around, though, because Missouri wine is making a comeback.

Started by German and Italian immigrants who found the state's soils and climate to their liking, wineries were a booming business as the 20th century dawned, but after 13 years of Prohibition, they had virtually dried up.

A resurgence that started slowly in the 1970s, however, continues to bear fruit, and more than 80 wineries are now operating at a pace that increased production by 70% from 2001 to 2005.

Most are located in clusters across the heart of the state, as well as in the southwest and southeast. That, according to Phyllis Meagher of Meramec Winery at St. James, benefits all wineries because it lends itself to a tourist trade that enjoys traveling the state's “wine trails.”

Meagher, the first president of the Missouri Grape Growers Association formed in 1982, believes self-help efforts have been key to the rebirth. Winemakers convinced lawmakers to fund industry efforts with a tax on all wine sold in the state, and that has led to a wide range of activities, including the establishment of the Institute for Continental Climate Viticulture and Enology at the University of Missouri where winemaking and grape-growing practices are studied.

A 2005 study pegged the industry's total economic value to the state at \$640 million, and growth continues alongside greater technical expertise, improved production practices and intensified promotion. Ever-present, though, is an awareness of the state's rich winemaking heritage.

“We're always standing on somebody's shoulders,” Meagher concludes.

■ For more information on Missouri wine, visit [www.missouriwine.org](http://www.missouriwine.org).

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