



WEEKENDER

By
Martin Northway

With wineries, Old World festivals, and the scenic Ozark Mountains to enjoy, visitors to Hermann, Missouri, have good reason to celebrate.

Hermann's Vintage Heritage

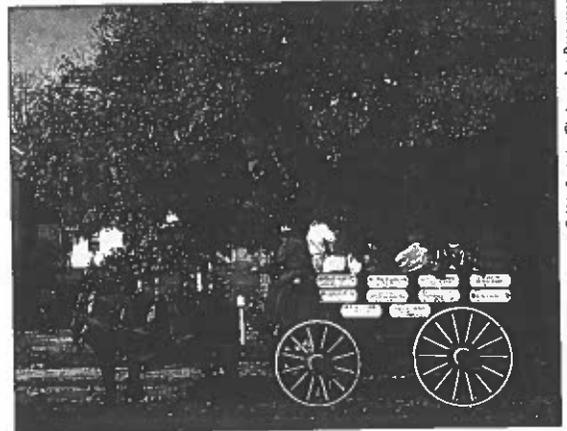
*"In heaven there is no beer.
That's why we drink it here!"*
—Popular drinking song

The leaves of the hardwood trees glimmer russet and gold in the upper reaches of Missouri's Ozark Mountains, along the curving brown Missouri River west of St. Louis. Here on a bluff above the river in historic Hermann, Missouri, people are literally dancing in the streets, from the Hermannhof Winery's Festhalle near the river to the 600-seat pavilion at Stone Hill Winery across town.

It is Oktoberfest. But it could be Maifest or a host of other festivals in all seasons of the year because there is something about Hermann that likes a party. It's a tradition that, like their wines, Rhineland Germans brought here in 1836.

There is much to celebrate. This beautiful community of 2,800 continues to thrive, much as it was in the last century. Hermannites have aggressively preserved and promoted their setting and history. Most structures are substantial brick and, as in European towns, huddle the sidewalks. More than 100 grace the National Register of Historic Places, and the state has set aside two of the structures for its Deutschheim site and German-history tours.

In the modern renaissance of Missouri vineyards and winemaking, Hermannites have something else to toast. In 1900, Missouri was the nation's second-leading producer of wine, and Stone Hill Winery was



Visitors weary from touring Hermann's numerous historical sites can catch a lift during festivals and on busy weekends.

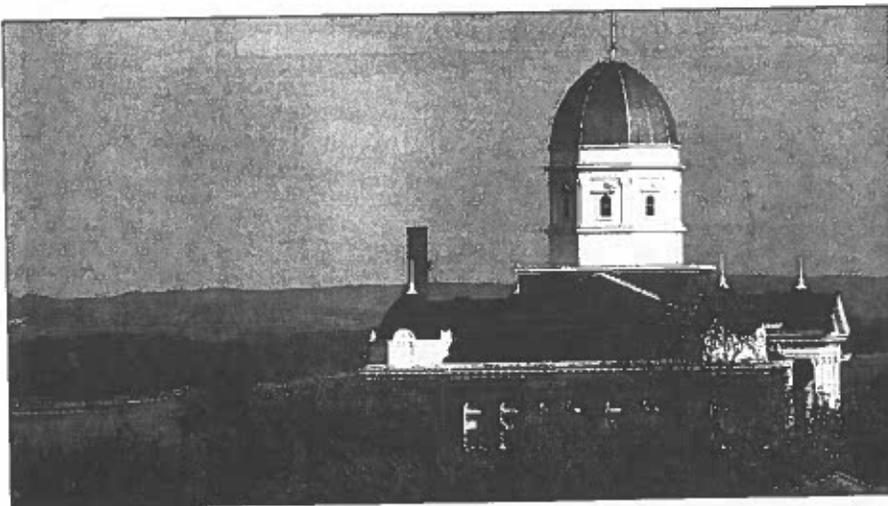
the third-leading U.S. winery. Prohibition, however, destroyed all that. But in 1965, Stone Hill was resurrected by Betty and Jim Held. Held is a big, mustachioed, charismatic individual who has helped revolutionize Missouri winemaking. With Stone Hill as its flagship, the state's wine industry has grown to 30 wineries producing more than 300,000 gallons a year. Almost half is produced by Stone Hill. Its historic cupolaed house with tasting room, winery, arched cellars (the nation's most extensive), and highly regarded Vintage 1847 Restaurant attract more than 250,000 visitors annually.

Three of the Helds' four grown children are degreed enologists working in the business. "They grew up making wine right here," says marketing director Jim Ashby. "They grew up, actually, right on top of the winery. The office I'm sitting in used to be a bedroom."

Stone Hill's early mainstay was wine made from durable American grapes, particularly the Catawba, foxy-flavored varieties not highly regarded by connoisseurs. But Stone Hill has added to its vineyards several French-American hybrids—Seyval Blanc, Vidal Blanc, and Vignoles—all white wines that under the Helds' tender loving care have lifted the winery's reputation. Last year, Stone Hill garnered 138 national and international awards, including Wine Grower of the Year and Wine Maker of the Year from Wineries Unlimited.

The Vintage 1847 Restaurant has been romantically restored from an old carriage house and stable. Inside, you can dine in a booth placed in an old stall. Delicious, reasonably priced German fare is issued from the kitchen of award-winning chef Gary Buckler, including a mouthwa-

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Hermann's Gasconade County Courthouse dome looks across the Missouri River. The building was dedicated in 1898 and built with a \$50,000 private bequest.

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Hustling bottles of award-winning wine is just part of the flurry of activity at Stone Hill Winery during Hermann's annual Oktoberfest, a celebration of the town's winemaking heritage.

tering schnitzel with sour cream sauce and accompanying red cabbage and hot German potato salad, all of which are beautifully complemented by a glass of Steinberg created right here. Not a bad prelude to a play or revue at Hermann's Show-Boat Theater on East Fourth Street.

As you browse Hermann's shops and restaurants or venture just a little off the beaten path, you quickly realize that the town's distinctive, often individualistic people are its real treasure. Some, like 85-year-old Kermit Baecker, seem to actually embody local history. Baecker and his wife, Pat, 86, frequent the Rockhouse Restaurant, one of the places favored by locals if not gourmets. Here you'll find substantial country and German food.

There's a trace of German, too, in Baecker's Midwestern twang. Born and reared in Hermann, he says, "At home, when I was up to 7, 8 years old, we spoke German, and that was kind of the universal tongue. But then in World War I, I think they thought we were all a bunch of spies, and people really made an effort to speak English, and it's been English ever since." He does enjoy, however, conversing with the many Germans who are among modern-day visitors.

Baecker's roots go back to an immigrant great-great-grandfather who began

farming nearby in 1851. The Baeckers' home above the Gasconade River, which intersects the Missouri River, is on a hill just a mile from the original family farm. Young Baecker had a yen for the river, and in 1927, he began to work first on steamboats and then on diesel-powered craft on the Illinois, Mississippi, Missouri, and Ohio rivers. He eventually earned a master pilot's license. Having retired in 1970, he misses "matching wits with Mother Nature." His wife says, "Every chance he gets, he's down by the river." He also helps run the River Room in the Hermann Museum, which is housed in the old German School Building.

Baecker remains a close watcher of daily and seasonal changes in the Missouri River, once Hermann's lifeblood. And there was much to watch during the flood of 1993. Flood waters broke through the levees, inundating and transforming, perhaps forever, the once-fertile farm valley. Low-lying fields are pocked with deep chasms and up to 12-foot mounds of sand. Some farmers are still battling to reclaim their land. Others will have to give up their livelihood, and small towns (some that are 150 years

old) are being uprooted and moved.

Strong, resilient Hermann has endured. Twice disrupted by floods, this time more seriously, the town's toymaking Steven Manufacturing Company has finally moved to higher ground in the industrial park. At Hermannhof Winery, an old brewery restored as a winery in 1978 and itself enjoying a growing reputation for both wine and smoked sausage,

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Hermann Area Wineries

- 1 Adam Puchta Winery, Hermann
- 2 Bias Vineyards and Winery, Berger
- 3 Hermannhof Winery, Hermann
- 4 Stone Hill Winery, Hermann

