

## NEW JERSEY WINE COUNTRY ... WAIT, WHAT?

It may be a surprise to many, but some of the best wine (and best scenery) is right here in The Garden State, and not too far from your front door.

By [John Dunphy](#) | [Email the author](#) | January 7, 2011

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Unionville Vineyards, in Ringoes, Hunterdon County. Photo Credit Stephen D. Johnson  
Photos (3)

Rolling hills. Picturesque farmland. Lush, full rows of plump grapes.

For most, these may be things to describe the wine country of Napa, France, even the Finger Lakes region of New York State.

Add New Jersey to that list.

For years, The Garden State has been making significant inroads into the wine business, amassing an almost cult-like following. I am one of its members.

It began about five years ago when, looking for something to do on a day off, I looked online for fun, cheap (or free) things that wouldn't take me all day to get to.

I arrived at [Unionville Vineyards](#).

The drive through the Ringoes section of East Amwell, in Hunterdon County, was a stark contrast to my childhood home in Middletown, the most populated town in Monmouth County (and it's an equally stark contrast to my current home of Morristown). Those rolling hills and picturesque farmland were so abundant, I needed to check my map to make sure I hadn't crossed the state line.

And those lush, full rows of plump grapes? We may not be in California, but who cares?

Later, I took a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon I bought there to a friend's party in Brooklyn. When I told her the wine had come from New Jersey, she laughed. To this day, she always asks when I am going to bring her another one.

This somewhat hidden gem—indeed, all 30-plus wineries in New Jersey—is part of why we selected Unionville Vineyards for this installment of *Day Tripper*, our weekly look at destinations that are out of town but in reach, and worth the drive.

## DAY TRIPPER DIGEST

**Estimated Travel Time:** About an hour.

**Why it's Worth the Trip:** Not only is Unionville Vineyards a great place to sample wines, it's not alone. Several other wineries are close by, including one just down the street. It's also within a reasonable distance from several other attractions, including Lambertville and Princeton.

**How to Get There From Here:** Take Route 124 west to I-287 south for about 18 miles. Merge onto US-202 south (Exit 17) toward US-22. Make sure you stay to the left to remain on US-202/Route 31 south. Turn left onto Wertsville Road. Turn right onto Rocktown Road and you cannot miss the winery. Here are more detailed directions, [starting from Morristown Town Hall](#).

**You'll Probably Get Hungry:** Lambertville is only about 15 minutes away, and features several world-class dining options, including [Hamilton's Grill Room](#), the gorgeous and historic [Lambertville Station](#) and the authentic Italian tastes of [Deanna's](#). There's even a brewery in Lambertville ([River Horse Brewing Company](#)) and hip New Hope, Pa., is just over the bridge. You might need two days for this ...

**Can't Sip Just One?** Old York Cellars, one of the newest wineries in New Jersey (taking over for Amwell Valley Vineyards, which closed several years ago), is just five minutes away on Old York Road. Hopewell Valley Vineyards, in nearby Hopewell Township, is less than 20 minutes away via Route 31 south. And, several other wineries are still within a reasonable driving distance.

**Don't Want to Go to Hunterdon County?** We're not sure why not, it's beautiful out there. If distance is a factor, there really isn't anything much closer. Four Sisters Winery, in Belvidere, Warren County, is about 50 minutes away. Cava Winery & Vineyard, in Hamburg, Sussex County, is about as far.

Though wine has been in New Jersey for centuries, prohibition and archaic laws through the 20th century shut down many sources. Only in the last 20 years or so has wine enjoyed a rebirth in the Garden State.

Sitting on nearly 100 acres of preserved farmland, Unionville Vineyards was one of the early adopters of the wine renaissance. Opened in 1992, it saw its own rebirth two years ago, when the original owners decided not to continue the business and threatened to shut it down. A group of local investors came in and reopened the winery several months later.

Cameron Stark, a graduate of the highly-respected U.C. Davis, became head winemaker several years before, and continues to produce an exceptionally robust variety of reds, whites, even a coveted Port, that have won numerous awards, both nationally and internationally.

Wine Shop manager Lauren Otis said 2010 was a good year for wine at Unionville, through winter, spring, summer and fall.

"One thing people should absolutely know, whatever the weather, it's lovely to come out," he said. "With a dusting of snow, a tasting at the end of the day, it's wonderful."

Unlike a lot of wineries in New Jersey (including Old York Cellars) that are open only on weekends, Unionville Vineyards is open from noon to 5 p.m. seven days a week. But, on Saturday and Sunday, free winery tours take place at 2:30 p.m., so some may want to wait until the weekend to check them out.

If you do wait until the weekend, also stop over at Old York Cellars (open noon to 5 p.m. Friday through Sunday), located on some of the oldest agricultural land used for wine making in New Jersey, though its current occupiers have only been open for business since October 2010. Their wines include Malbec and

Merlot, Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon, among others, including several dessert wines. Tastings are \$5, a standard price at most New Jersey wineries.

"I think New Jersey wine can stand up against anybody else's wine anytime," said Mary Ann Gares, whose son, Scott, was winemaker for the previous tenants and for Old York Cellars. "People should definitely come out and taste for themselves. It's a wonderful opportunity to get out. We're very picturesque out here.

"Bring a picnic lunch and spend the day in the vineyard," Gares said. Or, in several vineyards.

Otis said those interested can learn about the history of wine making in New Jersey, "and sample some of what we have to offer," which includes Pinot Noir, Pinot Grigio and the Pheasant Hill Chardonnay, which took gold in the International Wine and Spirit Competition last year.

During the rest of the week, tastings range from the standard \$5, to \$10, which includes premium tastings.

Unionville Vineyards is a great spot for wine, but really, there are many options, if you're willing to put enough gas in the tank and any preconceived notions to the side. To see the full list of New Jersey wineries, visit [www.newjerseywines.com](http://www.newjerseywines.com).