

# Wineries growing into larger tourist draw

## Visitors bureau putting together packages to entice more visitors

By Dan Nienaber  
dnienaber@mankatofreepress.com

More than a decade after south-central Minnesota's first winery began welcoming customers for tours and special events, the winery business is becoming a growing tourism draw for the region.

Morgan Creek Vineyards, about a 20-minute drive west of Mankato, has been growing and improving since it opened the state's only underground winery in 1998. More recently, Indian Island Winery, a slightly shorter drive east from Mankato, also has been drawing visitors.

Many visitors are from the Twin Cities area, but the Indian Island guest book has names from almost every state in the country, co-owner Ray Winter said. A large number of the out-of-town customers he talks to say they visit more than one winery during their trip.

"We beat our expectations last year," he said. "We sold out our entire wine supply and we're doubling our stock for the coming year. We've won some awards and have a good shot at selling out again."

There are more than 30 wineries and vineyards in Minnesota, and many others are being planned or already close to opening. Another winery, this one along the short Highway 22 drive between Mankato and

St. Peter, will start taking shape this year and is scheduled to open in May 2012.

One draw for the wineries are the fall grape stomps, which bring potential customers in to watch teams crush grapes the old-fashioned way. Morgan Creek and Indian Island also serve specialty foods, which include real wood oven pizzas at Morgan Creek and elk burgers and wild rice soup at Indian Island.

Larissa Mrozek of the Greater Mankato Convention and Visitors Bureau said the wineries are a selling point when she's encouraging groups to bring their conventions to Mankato. The venues provide an option for smaller off-site gatherings or a place to visit after a day of meetings at the downtown civic center.

"We're really excited about that industry blooming down here," she said. "We've had such good luck with both wineries. It's an extra activity that gives people somewhere to go instead of just hanging around the hotel."

"We only see that growing, especially with more wineries coming in."

The wineries also provide an added draw for regular tourists, said Anna Thill, Convention and Visitors Bureau president. The bureau plans to put together packages that will provide tourists with a vari-



Above: A crowd of wine fans enjoy the outdoor seating area at Indian Island Winery, which is about five miles south of Smith's Mill and Highway 14 on Blue Earth County Road 37.

Photos by Pat Christman

ety of events that highlight the wineries along with other things to do in Mankato, such as riding the miles of bike trails or canoeing on area rivers.

They're hoping the packages will give people another reason to spend a night or two, or maybe more, in the area.

"We're going to try to marry some experiences together," Thill said. "We'll have packages with a hotel, a trip out on the river or a bike ride and a winery tour."

"We haven't had a focus on that in the past. Now it's really starting to boom and there's a lot of interest."



An old barn, open grass and a flowing creek provide a scenic backdrop for those visiting Morgan Creek Vineyards west of Mankato.