



Photos by Don Campbell / HP staff

Michael Moyer, program director of the Great Lakes Wine Institute, explains the operation of a wine press Thursday during a press conference on the new commercial teaching winery program at Lake Michigan College.

# LMC uncorks wine program

College introduces director, shows off gear

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**BENTON TOWNSHIP** — The Great Lakes Wine Institute is officially up and running — with Lake Michigan College’s weight behind it and a groundswell of excitement about its potential contribution to the local economy.

The institute will serve as the hub of Lake Michigan College’s newly created enology and viticulture program, which is in tune with Southwest Michigan’s agricultural- and tourism-focused economy, LMC President Bob Harrison said.

“This is a great program for the college,” Harrison said. “We’re very excited about it. We see it as a great opportunity to grow jobs — not only in Southwest Michigan, but throughout the rest of the state. The wine program can be a cata-

lyst to grow jobs in the tourism industry, the food programs and in the hospitality industry.”

About 275 people turned out at Grand Upton Hall, where LMC hosted a Cornerstone Chamber of Commerce “Business After Hours Agenda” meeting to formally introduce the institute, which marks its first commercial teaching winery.

Eight students are already enrolled in the new program, which starts this fall under its new director, Mike Moyer — who moved here from Walla Walla, Wash., after he became excited about its possibilities, he said.

“You guys are sitting on a gold mine here, and I think we need to get over our inferiority complex because Michigan wines really are fantastic,” Moyer said. “We want to give people a hands-on learning experience ... and also, have an understanding of the macroeconomics of the wine industry, so they can contribute to the economic development of the state.”

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Glasses of wine are poured Thursday during a press conference on the Great Lakes Wine Institute.

## WINE

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There's more to the industry than meets the eye, Moyer said.

"It's not just production, and it's not just tasting rooms, it's farming. It's quality control, it's equipment manufacturing, it's warehousing and logistics. It is a lot, in addition to agritourism," he said.

Michigan's wine industry is also a major player economically with 107 wineries that draw more than 2 million visitors per year, said Linda L. Jones, executive director of the Michigan Grape & Wine Industry Council.

"As a result of our ideal climate nationally for fruit and wine growing, Michigan ranks in the top ten states in the country for wine grape production. The number of wine rooms and tasting rooms continues to grow around the state," she said.

However, though the industry's market share has continued to grow – at about 10 to 15 percent annually – it's also facing a shortage of skilled professionals needed to maintain that position, Jones said.

"To support this growth, we need a work force development strategy to provide the entrepreneurs – and the employee base – to advance the industry continuously," Jones said. "This Great Lakes Wine Institute is positioned to fill this role – not only for Michigan, but for the region."

Jobs and economic growth were the main things on LMC's mind when it began creating the

program in 2012, Harrison said, before giving his formal remarks.

"It is about growing the local economy, and we think a wine program – such as the one we're starting – can help meet some employment needs in the wine industry, but also, have spinoff effects into the culinary arts, or the food and restaurant business," he said.

To help promote its new program, LMC has struck partnership deals with eight chambers of commerce – including Cornerstone – from Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties, Harrison said.

The critical moment came when Clinton Gabbard, vice president of student services, suggested looking into a wine program because he came from Walla Walla Community College, where Moyer also worked, Harrison said.

"Actually, groups of employees have been out there three times. We were at one of the wineries," Harrison said. "Mike was there, he connected with Clint, and next thing you know, Mike was expressing an interest in the program."

Moyer was Walla Walla's first enology instructor, where he worked from 2003 to 2010. He also worked for five years on the commercial side at Figgins Family Wine Estates, which is Walla Walla's oldest winery, he said.

Moyer said that he became interested in coming here after talking with Gabbard, whom he didn't know very well, "but our paths had crossed," he said.

Moyer talked several times with Gabbard about



Don Campbell / HP staff

**Dr. Robert Harrison, Lake Michigan College President, speaks to the media Thursday during a press conference on the new commercial teaching winery program at Lake Michigan College.**

LMC's efforts, but the turning point came when he received a box of eight to 10 Michigan wines to taste.

"They were all great, and one of them was actually quite stunning. I thought, 'Wow, if they can make this type of wine here, the sky's the limit for them – this is worthwhile pursuing,'" he said.

Moyer's hiring proved decisive in ensuring that the program gets off to a great start, said Karma Vista Vineyard owner Joe Herman, who served on the advisory committee that created the new program.

"To have his kind of background just is very exciting," Herman said.

The institute is housed in a temporary site in an unused portion of the Mendel Center's east side, Harrison said. The college has a designated a barn

that it owns at the corner of Empire and Yore avenues as the permanent site.

"We'll renovate that for use as a tasting room, a small conference venue, and a building for making wine. We'll also put in some grapevines there," he said.

Until that time comes, students are using Michigan State University's site on Hillendale Road for a temporary harvesting site to produce the grapes needed in making the wine, Harrison said.

The barn renovation project's total estimated cost is about \$4 million, which the college hopes to fund through a capital campaign that's still in the planning stages, Harrison said.

"There's still an awful lot to get done. We're just at the start," he said.