

LAKE MICHIGAN COLLEGE

# A barrel of memories

## Two Southwest Michigan founding winemakers honored

By **LOUISE WREGG**  
HP Staff Writer

**BENTON TOWNSHIP** — Two Southwest Michigan men who were pioneers in making the area a wine destination were memorialized Wednesday when two French oak barrels were dedicated in their names to Lake Michigan College in Benton Township.

Officials said that Len Olsen, who died Dec. 2, 2014, and David Braganini, who died July 5, blazed the trail for future winemakers in the area.

“Both of these gentlemen I’ve known since I was a young kid,” said Chris Moersch, president of the Lake Michigan Shore Wine Trail, the organization that donated the barrels. “We wanted to pay homage to two people who really blazed the trail for the rest of us.”

He said Braganini started the wine trail, which includes 20 Southwest Michigan wineries, in 2002.

“It’s harder to get people to come out and visit just a single winery, but when they can come out and visit several over a weekend, it grabs a lot more people’s attention,” he said.

In addition, Moersch said it helps the small,

start-up wineries to be able to get their names out there.

“They really were pioneers in the industry,” said Mike Moyer, wine and viticulture technology director at the college. “They helped move Michigan and the Michigan wine industry in a positive direction.”

Gunnar Olsen, Len Olsen’s son, said his father founded Tabor Hill Vineyard and Wine Cellar in Buchanan and, later, opened Baroda Founder’s Wine Cellar in Baroda.

“It means a lot knowing that people recognize my father for all the things he’s contributed to the wine industry,” said Gunnar Olsen, who owns the Baroda winery.

Moyer said Olsen and Braganini were among the first people to cultivate international varieties of grapes in Southwest Michigan. Before that, wine made in Michigan used Concord juice grapes, he said.

“They also showed the people here and in the rest of the country and even the world that we can make really high quality wine here,” he said. “That hadn’t been done before.”

Moyer said the barrels

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Don Campbell / HP staff

**Michael Moyer, Wine and Viticulture Technology program director at Lake Michigan College, unloads two French oak wine barrels donated to the school in memory of two local founding winemakers.**



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**Two French oak wine barrels are donated to the Lake Michigan College Wine and Viticulture Technology program in memory of two local founding winemakers, David Braganini and Len Olsen, during a dedication ceremony Wednesday at The Hanson Technology Center.**

## **BARRELS**

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were made in France from French oak trees and cost about \$1,000 apiece. He said French oak gives wine a more subtle flavor than American oak.

“They both have their place,” he said. “There are plenty of good wineries that use nothing but American oak.”

He said the college’s wine program, which is in its second year, has some used French oak barrels, but these are the first new

ones. He said older barrels no longer add flavor to the wine.

“These barrels will definitely help make some fantastic red wine from the 2016 vintage,” he said. “I’m really excited to have them.”

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