

Urban winemaker taps into thirst for local flavor

by [Bridget Macdonald](#)

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Although Greg Fischer has only three employees at Beverage Art Brewer and Wine-maker Supply Inc., the brewers supply store he opened 15 years ago at 10033 S. Western Ave., he oversees 6 million seasonal workers in a behind-the-scenes winemaking business.

Fischer, who launched Wild Blossom brand wines in 2000, specializes in making honey wine, called mead, and keeps 80 beehives throughout the city to supply the niche operation.

Wild Blossom is the only mead-making operation in Illinois and one of just a handful in the Midwest, according to Fischer. But he has found a local market for his product, an ancient beverage once popular in countries like Norway where grapes could not be cultivated. Describing the weed-choked vacant lots that pockmark the city as his vineyards, Fischer explained that producing honey is among the few agricultural practices that can take place in an urban environment, making Chicago an ideal landscape for mead.

Honey is plentiful, but there's limited space for Fischer's winemaking operation at Beverage Art. Although his output has quadrupled since 2000, when he produced just 1,000 gallons, Fischer said he is confined to operating at a break-even level. His \$600 first-class wine-maker's license permits him to sell up to 25,000 gallons a year, but he has capacity to produce only 4,000 gallons in his East Beverly facility.

The median price of Fischer's mead is \$14.95 per 750 ml bottle, so a gallon of mead equates to \$74.75. With 4,000 gallons produced last year, that computes to sales of about \$299,000, up from about \$74,750 in 2000. Fischer aims to increase production to 24,000 gallons in a larger facility he's planning to build within the next two years, potentially boosting mead sales to \$1.8 million a year.

Bill Newton, wine and special events manager for Binny's Beverage Depot, said the Chicago alcohol retailer has carried Wild Blossom meads for several years, and regularly stocks them in more than half of its 21 stores. Newton said he has noticed increasing consumer interest in local products, and that while mead does not necessarily "explode" off the shelves, "Wild Blossom does pretty well."

In addition to Binny's, Fischer sells his mead through Sam's Wine and Spirits, Whole Foods Markets, and a few independent retailers and restaurants. Karyn's Fresh Corner Café, a vegetarian restaurant at 738 N. Wells St., features six of Wild Blossom's organic meads on the menu.

Fischer said growing awareness about local products has fermented interest in the wine- and beer-making process as well. Sales of brewing supplies at Beverage Art have been steady despite the economic downturn, as has enrollment in the wine- and beer-making classes he holds in the barrel room across the street.



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Beverage Art and Brewer Supply at 10033 S. Western Ave. in East Beverly began as a brewer's supply store 15 years ago, but now encompasses a winery behind the scenes.

Classes cost \$85 for a single session, or \$95 for two, plus the cost of supplies and ingredients, which Fischer said run between \$100 and \$200. Participants learn about the process of fermentation before making beer during the first class, and then return to bottle what they have made in a second session. Fischer said there are typically 12 to 15 people enrolled in a class every Saturday, and he holds corporate classes and special events as well. On Valentine's Day, he hosted a program for couples, called "Make Your Lover Wine."

Although he makes some wine from grapes imported from Italy, California and Michigan, Fischer said mead accounts for 75 percent of his 4,000-gallon output and is more economical to produce than grape wine. Fischer said it takes about four pounds of honey to produce one gallon of mead, compared to about 15 pounds of grapes for a gallon of wine.

According to William Buckley, president of the Illinois State Beekeepers' Association, the equipment and bees for a single hive cost about \$200, and he added, "Once you get a colony going, as long as the bees survive the winter, the inputs are very low." Bees that die off can be replaced at relatively low expense. Buckley said a three-pound package, containing approximately 5,000 bees, costs between \$75 and \$80.

"Everything is sticky," cautioned Fischer, his shoes smacking as he walked across the testing room floor. He explained that regulations governing the production and sale of alcohol in Illinois create complications that "make it hard to stay in business as a small seller." According to Dusanka Marijan, licensing administrator at the Liquor Control Commission, Fischer must possess a manufacturer's liquor license, which costs \$600, and a winery-shipper's license, \$150, in addition to his wine-maker's license.

But because East Beverly is a dry neighborhood, Fischer does not qualify for the specialty-retailer's license that would allow him to sell to individual customers, so he sells only through distributors or directly to retailers.

Fischer said the pending expansion will provide a more sustainable future for his business, and for the local environment, explaining that it will be the first "green" winery in Illinois, run on solar and thermal power. The mead, he said, is already energy efficient.

"It's carbon-positive," requiring no fertilizer, irrigation, pesticides or herbicides, Fischer said. For each bottle of mead, his bees pollinate approximately 2 million flowers, which will generate as many as 20 million new seeds.

So long as his hives stay healthy, when the new facility is complete the bees will take care of business.



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Greg Fischer, who launched Wild Blossom Wines in 2000, lifts the lid on a batch of honey wine, known as mead. The amber-colored liquid made sizzling sounds as it fermented inside the barrel.