

Don't go to Napa Valley for Extraordinary Wine, it's Right Here at Home

MARBIDCO supports growth of Co-op and Port of Leonardtown Winery



The Southern Maryland Wine Growers Cooperative (SMWGC) was formed in 2007 to become a local market for vineyards to sell their wine grapes after the region transitioned away from tobacco production.

MARBIDCO was there at the start with the first of many financial resources that would help the Cooperative grow over the years - including the

Maryland Farm and Producer Viability Program, a financial tool that's goal was to increase start-up rates of agricultural operations and resource-based businesses.

Partnering with St. Mary's County and Leonardtown, interested farmers and others with a passion for wine set in motion a plan to ensure the success of wine grape growing in Southern Maryland. Grapes for wine hadn't been grown in the area since the time of Governor Charles Calvert in the 1600s The SMWGC was the first agricultural cooperative winery in Maryland leading the way for viticulture and future wineries to be established.

The potential for the emerging wine industry to positively affect agriculture and tourism in Southern Maryland was recognized and supported by the State, and the local governments, and farmers.

Farmers also recognized the corporate structure of a cooperative provides a means to share in the profitability of the value-added products that a winery creates.

In 2009, with a grant from St. Mary's County Government Department of Economic Development to the Town of Leonardtown, SMWGC entered into a lease agreement with the Town of Leonardtown to repurpose the former State Highway Administration building into a winery, making it the first commercial winery in St. Mary's County. The winery is located at the intersection of Maryland Route 5 and Newtown Neck Road in Leonardtown.

The Port of Leonardtown Winery was created by SMWGC and opened for wine production for the grape harvest of 2009. The winery tasting room opened for retail and wholesale wine sales in May 2010.

The Port of Leonardtown Winery prides itself on purchasing locally grown Maryland wine grapes and producing award winning Maryland wines.

The cooperative started with 16 participating grape growers. Currently the winery has 12 cooperative vineyards from St Mary's, Calvert, and Charles counties.

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T. Pat Isles set the standard as a Winemaker and for the first six years created outstanding wines that not only won awards but more importantly helped establish a strong repeat customer base.

Beginning in 2016, Winemaker Lauren Zimmerman has raised the bar. The Port of Leonardtown is still winning awards and proving exceptionally high-quality wine can be grown and made in Maryland.

Since opening in 2010, the Co-op has won more than 150 awards including multiple Best in Class awards and many international medals. Not once but twice, The Port of Leonardtown Winery had the honor of being awarded "Best in Show" (in 2018 and 2021) and won the Maryland Governors Cup Wine Competition.

Currently, Winery Manager Michael Hughes and his staff keep the customers coming back for more.

Through continued reinvestment, each year wine production increases to meet customer demand and every year something new is added to the product list. Along the way, MARBIDCO was there with financing through grants and loans to assure the Co-op and the winery's success.

Following the first Maryland Farm and Producer Viability grant in 2007, the Cooperative applied for a Local Government Ag/RBI Project Cost Share Grant in 2009.

Under this program, a local or regional economic development office applies to MARBIDCO for grant funds to match a grant it is providing to an agricultural enterprise. The funds being utilized by the governmental entity must be own-source (rather than simply pass-through) funds.

Also in 2009, they were approved for an equity-converting-to-debt financing program designed by MARBIDCO to aid agricultural cooperatives.

Lastly, in 2011, the Co-Op applied for and received a \$10,000 Maryland Value-Added Producer Grant (Capital Assets Option) that helped them create a new tasting room.

This program was designed to encourage farms and other rural businesses that wanted to expand or diversify their operations through value added processing to purchase equipment or construct facilities.

Through these grant and loan programs, MARBIDCO has supported the growth and success of SMWGC and Port of Leonardtown Winery.

“With MARBIDCO’s support in a “newer” venture, not only for the State of Maryland, but for the agricultural community of Southern Maryland, we have become an award-winning winery and an example of the agricultural community working together for a common goal,” said Michael

Hughes, general manager at the winery. “Without MARBIDCO believing in, and financially assisting us, we wouldn’t be the thriving winery we are today.”

These SMWGC vineyards offer a vast supply of varietals for the winery to use to create their various wines:

- Forrest Hall Farm Vineyard - St. Mary’s County. Grows Cayuga, Chambourcin, Cabernet Franc, and Vidal Blanc.
- Gossett Farm - Calvert County. Grows Chambourcin.
- Gray Wolf Vineyard - St. Mary’s County. Grows Traminette, Vidal Blanc
- Lawton Hall Vineyard - St. Mary’s County. Grows Chambourcin and Vidal Blanc.
- Mulberry Hill Farm - Calvert County. Grows Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Vidal Blanc, Chambourcin, Charnel, and Norton.
- St Michaels Manor - St. Mary’s County. Growing Chancellor, De Chaunac, Vidal Blanc, and Villard.

- Stonemur Vineyard - Charles County. Grows Cabernet Franc, Vidal Blanc, Seyval Blanc, Barbera, Lemberger, and Vanessa.
- Summerseat Farm - St. Mary's County. Grows Barbera, Chambourcin, Cabernet Franc, Dolcetto, Malvasia Bianca, Nebbiolo, Petit Sirah, Petit Verdot, Sangiovese, Vidal Blanc, Viognier and Albariño.
- Tranquility Vineyard - Calvert County. Grows Cayuga, Chardonnay, and Chambourcin.
- Port of Leonardtown Winery - St. Mary's County, Arandell