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# Beverage Industry

Cover Feature

## Oliver Winery's one-of-a-kind wines win with consumers

Indiana winery a one-of-a-kind tourist destination



Oliver Winery Co-founder Bill Oliver and CEO Julie Adams pose with a selection of their approachable wines that are winning with consumers. Now the 29th largest winery in the United States, Oliver Winery anticipates selling 900,000 cases of wine in 2021. (Photo by Tod Martens)

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*Barbara Harfmann*

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Released in the summer of 1978, the blockbuster musical “Grease,” ends at a school carnival with Danny Zuko (John Travolta), Sandy Olson (Olivia Newton-John) the T-birds and Pink Ladies lamenting that despite graduation, they “Go together” like “Chang chang changitty chang sha-bop, That’s the way it should be Wah-oooh, yeah! We’re one-of-a-kind Like dip da-dip da-dip doo-wop da doo-bee doo.” With

around 100,000 visitors annually, particularly on busy summer and fall weekends, Oliver Winery prides itself on being a “one-of-a-kind” Midwest tourist destination that brings people together for world-class, affordable wines, meat and cheese charcuterie boards, a stroll around its 5,000-plus flower-laden gardens or a picnic by the lake.

Ranked by Travel + Leisure magazine as one of the Top 25 wineries to visit in the United States, Bloomington, Ind.-based Oliver Winery & Vineyards, the largest winery in Indiana, produces more than 40 varietals of wine for every taste and palate — like semi-dry, dry whites, dry reds, dessert and sparkling wines as well as its popular fruit-forward, semi-sweet wines like Cherry Moscato, Blueberry Moscato and more.

The winery offers six wine collections: Vine Series Moscatos, Soft Wine Collection, Camelot Mead, Flight Series varietal wines, Pilot Project Experimental Wines, and an estate-bottled Creekbend Collection.

With the mantra of “wine is for everyone,” Oliver Winery’s portfolio stars its flagship, 54-medal award-winning Oliver Sweet Red, originally called “Soft Red Wine” — a name coined by the winery in 1983 to describe its less acidic, more rounded, sweet red wine. Oliver also makes a wide range of wine styles that include an 11.9% ABV Moscato, which blends Muscat Canelli and Muscat Alexander grapes with notes of mango and peach; a Sweet Rosé made with Catawba grapes; a 2018 Cabernet Sauvignon aged 15 months in French Oak and American barrels; a 13.3% ABV Sauvignon Blanc, and a Dry Red Blend that combines Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah.

Among Oliver Winery’s claim to fame is its Oliver Sweet Red (formerly Soft Red). “Our Soft Red really came about because of dumb luck. If we go back to the 1980s and mid-1990s, not a lot of players had a big interest in the sweet wine business,” notes Bill Oliver, co-founder and board member at his namesake Oliver Winery, which was officially founded by his dad, William Oliver, in 1972.

“Then there were a whole bunch of winemakers who began exploiting the market once consumers showed an interest in sweeter wines. But we were there from the beginning, and they’ve been our bread and butter,” he continues. “We knew our customers really liked our wines because we got a lot of immediate, positive feedback from our tasting room. People really liked our classic, ruby-red Concord and we used good fruit and did everything to ensure that we had the best quality.”



**Due to celebrate its 50th Anniversary in 2022, Oliver Winery, under the guidance of Winemaker Dennis Dunham, produces more than 40 varietals of wine for every taste and palate.**

*Photo by Tod Martens*

Thanks to customer feedback and high praise, the winery secured distribution in its home state of Indiana,” Oliver says. “That was the beginning of huge success in our distribution profits, and even our tasting room.”

Today, Oliver Winery's products are sold in 41 states. In the last 52-weeks (ending May 31), the Soft Wine Collection (Sweet Red, Sweet White, Sweet Rosé, Sweet Red Lime) clocks in at 280,000 cases sold, and flavored Oliver Moscato (Cherry, Blueberry, Lemon) at nearly 300,000 cases.

## **Rooted in hospitality**

Due to celebrate its milestone 50th anniversary in 2022, Oliver Winery & Vineyards, now the 29th largest winery in the United States, anticipates selling 900,000 cases of wine in 2021, it says. Since 2014, it has more than doubled its geographic reach. Oliver Wines also can be shipped direct-to-consumer (DTC) to 33 states.

With a second high-speed bottling line set to begin operations in August, the winery expects to increase its capacity from around 4,700 cases bottled per day (105,110 bottles) to 7,000 cases a shift, or a 49% increase of output.

And even before the advent of the new bottling line, the winery was seeing dollar sales and volume sales exponentially expand. Citing data for the total U.S. from New York-based Nielsen for the week ending May 22, the Oliver Winery brand ranking climbed 49 spots since 2020. The brand now ranks No. 60 in dollar sales, a 32% growth compared with 2020, while volume-wise (units), it was ranked No. 49.

“Even with the pandemic and the temporary shutdown of our tasting room, we sold more than 700,000 cases of wine, a 41% increase over 2019 case volumes and a 40% increase over 2019 sales,” says Julie Adams, CEO of Oliver Winery, who joined the 100-member team in 2009 as a controller. She also served as chief financial officer and vice president for Administration and Wholesale Sales, as president for five years, and since this year, as CEO.

“The winery has always been a place where we all wear many hats. It's a pretty small team for the amount of wine we produce,” Adams says. “We have an incredible team of dedicated folks that have stayed here for five, 10, 20 years. We're all willing to roll up our sleeves and contribute however we can contribute.

“...For us, our roots are in hospitality and we started out selling all of our wine out of the front door of the tasting room,” she continues. “Hospitality is just part of the ethos around the winery, to have hospitality for everyone ... and to make the wine approachable.”



**In the past year, Oliver’s semi-sweet Vine Series Moscatos were up 76% in dollar sales, with its 6.6% ABV Blueberry and Cherry among the Top 10 best-selling 750-ml Moscato wines in the U.S., the winery says.**

*Image courtesy of Olivery Winery*

The winery does about 10% of its business through its revamped, carefully curated tasting room and adjacent covered patio, while 90% of its business is through wholesale, Adams says. She reinforces that the three “Ps” are crucial to the winery’s success: people, product and place.

“We pay a lot of care and attention to our customers, our distribution partners and our people,” she explains. “When we bring industry partners here for a tour, it’s very much about the ambiance of this special place. They get to see that we’re not just another back of the house winemaking facility. We’ve created something magical.”

Nestled in Monroe County in the heart of Southern Indiana, Oliver Winery encompasses a picturesque 39-acre hilltop winery where each and every bottle of wine is carefully crafted and produced. Located three miles west of the main winery is its grape-growing operations: the 54-acre Creekbend Vineyard that features row upon row of grapevines that produce six varieties: Catawba, Vidal Blanc, Vignoles, Chambourcin and until 2020, the rare hybrid grapes, Cabernet Doré and Crimson Cabernet.

“From these grapes, we currently make 11 wines, including Tawny port, traditional Brut sparkling, semi-sweets, an off-dry rosé and dry reds,” says Dennis Dunham, vice president of operations and director of winemaking for Oliver Winery. “... From Creekbend Vineyard, we bring in up to 200 tons of fruit in a growing season. This doesn’t capture the full scope of the fruit we process in annually.”

Where the vineyard is situated — on limestone bedrock — in the Southern Indiana Uplands AVA makes the soil ideally suited for growing grapes, Dunham says.

“The hilltop location and stone foundation make for a well-drained soil that is optimal for vine health,” he explains. “Long, warm summers allow us to ripen a broad range of wine grapes here in the Indiana Uplands even though we get much more rainfall than a region like California. Oliver has had the opportunity to experiment with a new generation of wines, including hardy varieties and rare hybrids, with the intent to set the standard by which these uncommon wines are judged.”

## **Sourcing the right fruit**

Because selecting the right fruit for the winery’s many styles of wine is crucial to great-tasting wines, the fruit is sourced from across the United States.

“We make wines from grapes grown in our own Creekbend Vineyard here in Southern Indiana, as well as from the Great Lakes, California, Michigan, Oregon and Washington,” Dunham says. “Our apples, blueberry juice, cherry juice and blackberries are also carefully sourced. Right now, we select our apples and cherries from the Midwest and blueberries and blackberries from Oregon. We have a close relationship with all our growers, which allows us to choose the best fruit for each wine.”

It’s all about nurturing, rather than interfering with the fruit contained in the winery’s fruit-forward wines such as the Cherry Moscato, Blueberry Moscato and its newest offering, Lemon Moscato. The trio of easy-drinking wines are part of the winery’s award-winning Vine Series collection that first and foremost showcases the fruit and lets its natural characters shine through in the wine,

Dunham notes.

“We’ve seen such a phenomenal response to our Vine Series Moscatos and are excited to be one of the first to bring these unique varieties to market,” Dunham says. “Sweet wines have always been our sweet spot. We’ll keep innovating and producing approachable, fruit-forward wines that make wine interesting and delicious.”



**A go-to destination, Oliver Winery brings people together to enjoy wine and good conversation in a picturesque setting.**



*Image courtesy of Oliver Winery*

In fact, in the past year, Oliver's Vine Series Moscatos were up 76% in dollar sales, with Blueberry and Cherry among the Top 10 best-selling 750-ml Moscato wines in the U.S., the winery says, citing Nielsen data. "Cherry Moscato nearly doubled in volume last year," Dunham says.

Released in 2018, the 6.6% ABV Cherry Moscato features Michigan-grown Montmorency cherries and was born in the winery's experimental Pilot Project series, which enables Dunham and the winemaking team to play with a variety of flavors to show off the winery's adventurous side.

In March 2019, the winery released Blueberry Moscato, a fan favorite that also originated as a Pilot Project. Oliver Blueberry Moscato features deep, flavorful blueberry juice brought to life by the Moscato's tropical character and natural bubbles, the company says. The 6.8% ABV Blueberry Moscato blends Muscat Canelli and Muscat Alexander grapes with the juice of ripe blueberries and a touch of bubbles for a spritz finish.

The winery continues to up its ante in the sweet wine market with the March release of its newest variety: Lemon Moscato. Billed as a "lemon shakeup for grown-ups," the 6.8% ABV wine features light and tart lemon extract and retails for \$12 for a 750-ml bottle in stores across the Midwest and via the winery's online shop, with national availability in 2022, the winery says.

Other small-batch Pilot Project wines available online or in the tasting room include the limited-edition Lavender Cucumber Chill, a 6.8% ABV wine in a 500-ml bottle that, as its name suggests, features botanical extracts that create a light lavender taste with cool cucumber notes.

The winery's portfolio also includes the 500-ml 8.3% ABV Beanblossom Hard Cider in Original and Peach, and Camelot Mead, a 10% ABV honey wine that was one of the first wines produced at the winery more than 40 years ago. It is "an old world libation with new world perfection," the packaging states.

The winery also offers limited-edition, nationwide releases of seasonal wines, including Peach Pie in the summer and Apple Pie in the fall, which Dunham refers to as "the pumpkin spice of wine." He anticipates brisk sales this year for Apple Pie and Peach Pie with case sales of 30,000 and 25,000 cases, respectively.

A part of the Oliver team for a decade, Chris Hibbert, vice president of wholesale sales, notes that growth for Oliver Wines continues to accelerate.

“Growth in the 2010s was solid, and we’re starting off the new decade right, too, getting closer and closer to 1 million cases,” Hibbert says. “It’s incredible for our small team. We’ve nearly doubled our production in the last two years. We plan on growing as long as the demand exists, and it hasn’t slowed down yet.”

To grow awareness of the brand, Oliver wines is in the second year of its sponsorship of the NFL’s Indianapolis Colts. “Our products and wine cocktails made with, for example, our Blueberry Moscato have been well-received in the stadium,” Hibbert notes. “We’re hoping for many more success stories as stadiums open up and fans have access to live events again.”

## **In the beginning**

When Bill Oliver compares present-day winery operations to 50 years ago, he says it’s a surreal experience to see the phenomenal growth.

“I spent the last year digitizing old photographs, which was an interesting trip down memory lane,” he says. “These photos went back to the early days of the winery, when there was just nothing, and I’m being really generous by saying that. It was a really simple start.”

With hard work, the winery has surpassed Oliver’s expectations. Taste-wise, quality-wise and service-wise, Oliver says he’ll put his namesake winery up against the best of the best.

“My wife, Kathleen, and I love visiting wineries, and we were up in Napa Valley not long ago,” he says. “We tried to take that California experience and bring it here. The visitor experience here is so much more than opening a bottle of wine. Really good wines, attractively packaged, good service, the garden, the ambiance, the décor and the tour — it’s all part of making the winery a go-to destination for people to visit. When all the pieces are working together, it just works.”

Oliver credits his father, who began experimenting with winemaking as a hobby at age 45 while working full-time as a law professor at Indiana University, with founding the winery. As a young boy, Bill accompanied his dad as he planted rows of grapes in what became the Indiana Uplands AVA — now known as Creekbend Vineyard.

“My dad taught for a long time as he had to continue teaching to pay the winery bills,” Oliver says. “My mom was here more often than my dad. I see a lot of wineries that are like that. It’s tough to make the transition from full-time job to full-time winery owner. You have to gauge the risk factors.”

At the same time, Oliver Winey officially opened its doors in 1972, the senior Oliver played a pivotal role in the 1972 passage of the Indiana Small Winery Act, which allowed retail sales of wine in the state.

“That was a big thing because it allowed direct-to-consumer (DTC) sales out the front door,” Oliver explains. “Most wineries can’t just start out distributing 100,000 cases through a distributor. There’s around 11,000 wineries in the U.S., but how many of them are successful in the three-tier system? I know it’s not a lot.”

“...Yet, we’ve been able to prosper through dogged determination and getting better each year, bit by bit. To the point where Oliver Winery is a self-sufficient operation,” he adds. “I’m really proud that we did something that has not been done before. We’ve gone national while being a winery in the Midwest. Naysayers said we couldn’t do it. We’ve hit the critical mass of success, while the doubters are kind of fading away.”

## **Building momentum for the future**

To meet continued demand, Oliver Winery is scaling up to give consumers everywhere a chance to “turn an ordinary day into a delicious occasion with its unique tasting wines.”

At Oliver Winery for 25 years, Dunham, like Adams, has worn many hats. After earning a chemistry degree from Indiana University, he made his mark in the tasting room, followed by stints as a cellar assistant, assistant winemaker and winemaker.

For winemakers to be successful, investment in the right equipment is necessary. “Last year we finished a new building than now contains 22 stainless steel fermentation tanks, with the capacity to hold a total of 50 tanks.” he explains. “And later this summer, we’ll have a new bottling line up and running as well. This gives us a lot of momentum.

“Winemaking is my passion,” Dunham concludes. “I believe winemaking is about bringing out the best qualities of delicious fruit. That’s why we make our wines in the gentlest way possible, showcasing ingredients by nurturing rather than interfering. It’s a true labor of love.”

## **AT A GLANCE**

Oliver Winery & Vineyards

**Founded:** 1972 by Indiana University law professor William Oliver

**Location:** Bloomington, Ind.

**Winery size:** 39-acre hilltop winery and 54-acre Creekbend Vineyards

**Number of visitors:** 100,000 annually, estimated

**Number of wines/varieties:** More than 40, including semi-dry, dry whites, dry reds, dessert and sparkling wines and semi-sweet, fruit-forward wines like the Cherry Moscato, Blueberry Moscato, Blackberry Moscato and new Lemon Moscato

**Grape yield:** Up to 200 tons of fruit from Creekbend Vineyard. Plus fruit via partner-growers in the Great Lakes, California, Michigan, Oregon and Washington

**Sales growth:** 1996, 20,000 cases sold; 2019, 500,000 cases sold (15% year-over-year growth); 2020, 700,000 cases sold (40% YOY growth); 2021, anticipate 900,000 cases sold

**Distribution:** 41 states and 33 states direct-to-consumer

**Employees:** 100

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## Bringing people together

Oliver Winery & Vineyards is a go-to destination for consumers who love taste-testing wine and learning about wine in a relaxed setting.

“Our staff are well trained and they can help anyone who walks through the front door find a wine they love,” CEO Julie Adams says. “We talk to our employees a lot about how special it is to provide people with a product that brings people closer together.

“When I think about going out and having a glass of wine with my friends or husband, I know we’re going to linger around the table and have a nice conversation,” Adams continues. “Wine extends that wonderful experience that we’re having together.”

The winery has a shop selling food and wine, and also offers reserved tasting flights on its covered patio, where each guest chooses his/her wine style — from dry, to semi-dry to sweet wines. Knowledgeable staff members guide the table through each selection. Visitors also can add-on single-serve artisan snacks of olives, meats and cheeses designed to pair with the wine. Each tasting includes a complimentary stemless tumbler to take home.

For \$25 a person plus tax, the winery also offers its popular two-hour picnic experience with a pre-set table for up to four guests. The picnic package features an assortment of gourmet meat and cheeses, fresh baked bread, homemade garlic spread, seasonal and dried fruits, and a souvenir wine tumbler for each guest.

For more information, visit [www.oliverwinery.com](http://www.oliverwinery.com).

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Barbara Harfmann, managing editor of *Beverage Industry*, visits beverage companies for cover stories and facility tours, and writes and edits for the magazine's print and online components. She also represents the magazine at trade shows and events. She earned a Bachelor of Science in Mass Communications and Public Relations from Illinois State University.

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