

Chateau Grand Traverse Names Virginia Usher Director of Winemaking

TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. — Chateau Grand Traverse recently named Virginia Usher incoming Director of Winemaking and Head of Production, placing a new leader at the helm of one of Michigan's largest and longest-established wine programs following a national search launched in 2025.

The announcement comes during Traverse City Food & Wine Week, as the region celebrates the chefs, winemakers, growers and producers who have helped establish Northern Michigan as one of the country's emerging food and wine destinations.

Usher follows longtime winemaker Bernd Croissant, whose career at Chateau Grand Traverse spans more than three decades. A native of Germany's Rheinland-Pfalz wine region, Croissant arrived on Old Mission Peninsula in 1991 for what was intended to be a one-year work-study program. He joined the winery permanently the following year and became winemaker in 1993.

Over the next three decades, Croissant helped expand and shape Chateau Grand Traverse and its focus on European grape varieties particularly well suited to Northern Michigan's cooler growing conditions, most notably Riesling. Today, the winery grows and produces the state's largest portfolios of European vinifera wines, with its vineyards, cellar, winemaking and production operations all located on its Old Mission Peninsula estate.

"Bernd has been an extraordinary part of this winery and its history," said Eddie O'Keefe, President of Chateau Grand Traverse. "Finding the person who would follow more than 30 years of that kind of leadership was never going to be about simply replacing a winemaker. We needed to think about what this winery needs for the next 20 years."

That led Chateau Grand Traverse to conduct a national search. The winery wanted a winemaker who had managed the demands of significant wine production, but who also understood cool-climate grapes and the importance of allowing a wine to reflect the region where it was grown.

"We wanted someone who had experience with a large, complex operation, but we weren't looking for someone to come in and change what makes Chateau Grand Traverse distinctive," O'Keefe said. "Virginia brings that level of production experience, but she also understands that great wine begins in the vineyard and should have a sense of place. That combination was incredibly important to us."

Usher comes to Northern Michigan following more than a decade with Mendocino Wine Company in California, where she advanced from enologist to Director of Winemaking. Her experience spans virtually every part of the winemaking process, from the laboratory and cellar to harvest planning, grape sourcing, quality control and leading production teams.

She earned a B.S. in Food Science and Technology with an emphasis in Enology and Viticulture and a minor in Chemistry from Oregon State University. She began making wine in 2009 at a small family winery in Southern California before building a career that eventually placed her in leadership of a major California wine operation.

For Usher, Northern Michigan presented an opportunity that would have looked very different even a generation ago. The Traverse Wine Coast has matured from an emerging wine region into a recognized

place of wine origin, increasingly drawing winemakers and industry talent from established wine regions across the United States and abroad.

“There is a real identity developing around the wines being grown and made here, and that was compelling to me,” Usher said. “My goals are to respect the fruit and the uniqueness of the region, make quality wine and support a sustainable business. I’m excited to build on what has already been established here while bringing my own experience and perspective to it.”

At Chateau Grand Traverse, Usher will begin to lead future winemaking starting with the 2026 harvest while overseeing the winery’s cellar, laboratory and production teams and working closely with its vineyard operation. She will also join the winery’s executive management team.

Her arrival comes as Chateau Grand Traverse enters its second half-century with exceptional momentum. Against an industry backdrop of declining national and regional wine sales, the winery has sharply outpaced the market, posting significant growth, rapidly gaining market share and expanding its distribution footprint in multiple states.

“We’re fortunate to be making this transition from a position of strength,” O’Keefe said. “Virginia understands the responsibility that comes with 50 years of history, but she also sees the opportunity ahead. That’s exactly what we we’re looking for.”

About Chateau Grand Traverse

Founded in 1974 on Old Mission Peninsula, Chateau Grand Traverse is a family-owned winery and a pioneering producer in Michigan’s modern wine industry. For more than 50 years, the winery has specialized in European vinifera grown in Northern Michigan’s cool climate and is particularly known for its estate-grown Rieslings. The Old Mission Peninsula estate includes vineyards, winemaking and production facilities, a tasting room, culinary and wine experiences, and a six-room boutique Inn overlooking the vineyards and Grand Traverse Bay.