

From vineyards to licensed boutique winery

Belle Fourche family founding new wine industry

By Milo Dailey, Butte County Post staff | Sunday, March 15, 2009

BELLE FOURCHE -- Since the early settlement era, spring-flooded soils have made the area a garden spot to serve mining and logging communities.

Along with hay for horses and vegetables for people, there always were a few folks growing enough grapes and berries to make a bit of wine.

But it took longer for people to pick up on the idea that the good soils and climate for grapes and berries could become much more than a hobby.

Belle Fourche dentist John Jackson and his wife, Patty, had long been wine hobbyists, and as their family grew, so did some of their ideas about the possibility that commercial winemaking with locally grown grapes could become an industry.

Jackson also is a longtime leader in Belle Fourche economic development efforts, so it all fit.

Jackson headed an effort to form the Black Hills Grape and Berry Growers Association, which has been active in promoting the new industry for the area.

Just last week, the association hosted a regional commercial grape-growing conference in Deadwood, with a hands-on program Friday near Belle Fourche on vine pruning.

Jackson began a tiny winery that has grown into the foundation of a "boutique" operation to take advantage of experimentation with various grape varieties. The winery is federally licensed and bonded.

And the Belle Joli Winery is still growing. His son Matthew left his chemistry major at the University of South Dakota for an oenology and viticulture degree at California State University, Fresno -- one of the world's top schools for grape and wine studies. John Jackson is looking forward to Matthew returning home to manage the winery.

"He has taken a number of winery business classes, and he will manage both the vineyards and the winery," John Jackson said.

Up to now, the development and growth of the vineyards and winery have fallen to John and Patty, with seasonal summer help. Matthew has been home in the summer to help, and son Christopher, the second-generation dentist, is involved in the business, also.

"At times, it's very labor-intensive, at planting, pruning and harvesting," Jackson said. "So the whole family gets involved."

The winery sits at the original Jackson vineyard, along Hay Creek in Belle Fourche in a small concrete building.

That original vineyard has about 300 plants and is the source of most of the grapes that go into Belle Joli wines. There's also a two-year-old, 25-acre vineyard east of Belle Fourche along S.D. Highway 212.

When the vines are mature for production, Jackson said, "Our estimate is four to six tons of grapes per acres. That's a lot of wine."

The soils and climate are good, but Jackson said the development of "cold-hardy" grapes has made big strides in quality.

"Even though we have been growing grapes for 30 years off and on, I think the quality of the cold-hardy grapes that we are using has increased significantly," he said.

Much of that work has come through universities in Minnesota and New York. Upstate New York has long had a commercial wine industry.

What happens now for Belle Joli?

"Within the next two years, 50 percent of the planted grapes east of Belle Fourche will come into production for our winery," Jackson said. "That will allow us to add a number of different varietals to our wine selection."

Jackson sees the Black Hills' potential for "good to superior" commercial-level wines.

"That's partly due to the fact that our climate here is semi-arid, with warm to hot days and cool evenings."

Those climate qualities bring grapes with high sugar and low acid levels. It's similar to the climates of some areas of southern France, Northern Italy and some of the winegrowing regions of Germany.

"We don't know exactly which varietals will do best here yet," he said. "We have six major varietals planted, with another four or five experimental varieties."

It's an ongoing learning process he said, adding that learning is what life is all about.