

Fruit of the Vine Ignites Entrepreneurial Spirit for Amateur Winemaker

Mahoning County's first winery plans to offer ice wine, more varieties, in years to come.

By Steadman Brahler

Dan and Cathy Mastropiétro grew up watching their grandfather make wine in the basement of his New Castle, Pa., home. Today, they're following in his footsteps, but on a much grander scale. The brother and sister have teamed up to establish the first winery in Mahoning County.

Mastropiétro Winery opened May 20 on 52 acres in Berlin Center, 12 years after Dan began making wine in his basement.

As children, Cathy Mastropiétro remembers, "We used to get occasional sips [of grandfather's wine] on special occasions." Winemaking was a family project, with their father and uncles crushing enough grapes to make wine for a year's worth of special occasions, she says.

Dan continued the tradition, sharing his wine with family and friends who marveled at its quality. Eventually, his wife encouraged him to enter an amateur winemaking contest at the Warren Italian Festival. Soon, the full-time electrician, part-time winemaker was winning gold medals in regional and national competitions.

With the official recognition growing for his wine, Dan and his wife, Marianne, and sister, Cathy, began dreaming about opening an Italian deli and wine store. Then they visited a country winery, where customers sampled wines while taking in the Ohio countryside and acre after acre of vineyards, Cathy says.

After one of Dan's wines, a Zinfandel, won a bronze metal in an international competition, the trio abandoned their idea for a store and opted instead to open a winery. They began looking for a site about two years ago, Cathy recalls, and found a farm for sale on Ellsworth Road, not far from Lake Milton and Berlin Reservoir.

They've spent the last year transforming the farm into a winery. The new 6,400-square-foot Tuscan-style building houses winemaking operations, a wine cellar, tasting room with massive stone fireplace, bar and seating for 50, banquet room, also with a fireplace, and seating for 60, and an outdoor patio with fireplace and seating for 50.

Pavilions with picnic-table seating overlook a one-acre lake, put in to enhance the view, and three acres of newly planted vineyards. The grape vines – 720 per acre – are so small they are still supported by bamboo stakes and although the metal fence posts have been installed, the wire fencing is yet to be strung between them.

It will take four years for the vines to mature, Dan says, and each acre should produce enough grapes to make 500 gallons of wine. Even so, he expects to continue buying the bulk of the grapes used at Mastropiétro Winery from vineyards in Ohio, New



CHEERS — Celebrating the opening of Mahoning County's first winery are, from left, Marianne, Daniel and Cathy Mastropiétro. They opened Mastropiétro Winery on 52 acres in Berlin Center.

York and California.

"We crushed 27 tons of grapes last year and we're hoping it gets us through," his sister adds.

Grapes are crushed in September, Cathy continues, and the wine is bottled in April. If the winery sells out, it won't be able to replenish its wine cellar until next year's wine is bottled. "We can only sell wine that we make here," she explains. "We can't sell what we've made at home."

Mastropiétro Winery offers eight varieties – Chardonnay, Riesling, Cabernet, Chambourcin, Dolce Rosso, Merlot, Zinfandel and Valley Red. Eventually, she says, she and her brother and sister-in-law plan to add more varieties, including ice wines, which are special dessert wines made from grapes that have frozen on the vine.

Of course, she notes, the winery won't be able to make the ice wines until their vineyards are mature enough to produce grapes.

Grapes grown in the winery's vineyards – Chambourcin, Vidal Blanc and Traminete – were selected based on their compatibility with climate and soil

conditions on the former farmland, Cathy reports.

Eventually, more grapes may be planted, her brother says, depending on the success of the three acres of grapes planted this year.

The partners, who run the winery and care for the vineyards themselves, wanted to start slowly, and work up to a bigger operation once they can afford to hire employees, Cathy says.

"We're hoping the winery will stimulate other economic activity – bed-and-breakfasts, things like that," she says.

Other wineries in northeastern Ohio have welcomed the addition of Mastropiétro Winery, she says. "Wineries really don't compete with each other. Everybody welcomes everybody. If there are more wineries to visit, more people will stop," Cathy reasons.

Mastropiétro Winery is open 5 to 9 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, 5 to 11 p.m. Friday, and 1 to 11 p.m. Saturday. Wines are available by the taste, glass, bottle or case.

Appetizers are available, but there is no full-service dining. A list of approved caterers is available to those reserving the banquet room.

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