

Wide River Winery Aged to Perfection

By Jeniece Smith, Bridges Magazine

It's been five years since Dorothy O'Brien first decided to share the fruits of her labor from organic gardening and grape growing with others, and she says she's learned a great deal along the way.

"It morphed into much more of a focus on wine," said O'Brien, sole owner of Wide River Winery in Clinton. "I like a dry white and a dry red, so that's what I started out producing. But along the way, I discovered that there's a much wider range of tastes out there that people are interested in exploring."

Today, the winery employs roughly 15 people and carries about a dozen varieties of wine, from sweet to dry, white to red. The aroma notes in O'Brien's products run the gamut fruity to floral, herbaceous to spicy, and caramel to nutty. Along with some seasonal varieties, the business also produces a sherry and a port wine.

Much has changed since the winery's first year, when O'Brien sold just a few hundred bottles. The winery has expanded its marketing along with its product line, and sold between 36,000 and 37,000 bottles last year.

Wide River Winery's products can be found in stores stretching from Dubuque to the Quad-Cities. And O'Brien says she's proud of the fact that her local wines are among the best-selling brands at Clinton's Hy-Vee.

O'Brien receives help from her children and their spouses in marketing the wine to the community through wine tastings, farmers markets and promotional events. But it's quite possible that the experience of the wine is best enjoyed within the atmosphere of the winery itself.

Wide River sits secluded off Highway 67 north of Eagle Point Park. A narrow gravel road – just off the sparkling waters of the Mississippi River – meanders up the side of a bluff, slanting steeply to the winery at the top.

O'Brien says the location and view inspired the winery's name, while her 26 years as an attorney and the half dozen lawyers in her family inspired some of the names of the wines. Two of O'Brien's children are heavily involved in helping run the business.



Wide River's label artwork, a portrait of a smiling woman wearing a headdress of grapes with a view of a Mississippi River sunset in the background, is a composite of two of O'Brien's daughters.

The employment law attorney is married to Clinton County Judge Charles Pelton. Two of the couple's five children have gone into law, with other extended family and in-laws also practicing. Often, O'Brien's family will serve as unofficial tasters of the product, and will end up kicking around ideas for names.

"We have a lot of lawyers in our family, and so everybody's very clever, of course," O'Brien said with a laugh. "When we're mixing up a new wine and we're just kind of sipping it and thinking about it, that's what's on our minds."

The courtroom-inspired monikers of Wide River's wines include Felony Red, White Collar Crime, Ms. Conduct, Ms. D'Meanor White, Conviction, Not Guilty, Blushing Testimony, Ms. Behavin' and Sweet Justice.

O'Brien said a new wine, Guilty Pleasures, is in the works for this year. The dark red wine contains chocolate and raspberry notes, and O'Brien says she got some feedback from customers on the deep red.

"I use my customers as guinea pigs," said O'Brien. "When we have a new wine, we sometimes mix up a small batch and have people taste it. And so far the customers are saying, 'Yeah, bring it on.' So we're looking forward to that one."

The winery also recently began carrying beer and wine from Great River Brewery, based in the Quad-Cities. And O'Brien's stock now includes wine jelly made by her daughter.

To help her customers expand their vocabulary in describing wine flavors, O'Brien has also decided to start selling the "Wine Aroma Wheel" this year. The wheel – with a diameter about the width of a sheet of notebook paper – has aroma descriptors in three tiers, starting with the most general in the center and moving to the most specific in the outer ring of the wheel.

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For instance, the wheel breaks the term “fruity” down to citrus, berry, tree fruit, tropical fruit and dried/cooked fruit, then branches out further into specific fruits like lemon, strawberry, cherry, pineapple and figs.

O’Brien said the wheel can help newer wine drinkers remember specifically why they like or dislike certain varieties of wine. Because Wide River’s product line has included the use of about 20 different grape varieties and a plethora of preparation methods, it can be helpful for customers to be able to distinguish subtle flavors in the product.

Wide River’s three-acre producing vineyard yields about nine tons – or 1,000 gallons – of wine a year. The majority of the grapes used in O’Brien’s product line comes from local growers in the Midwest. Last year, the business produced 8,000 gallons of wine, with each gallon yielding between four and five bottles.

Most of the grapes are hybrids between California grapes and Midwestern varieties, which are hardy to the sharply fluctuating seasons of the Midwest.

“In this climate, California grapes just plain wouldn’t make it,” said O’Brien. “They’re not tough. They can’t stand the winter and they can’t stand the summer because they’re very susceptible to disease.”

O’Brien says she likes to buy from nearby growers, mostly in Iowa and Illinois, and the local focus has paid off. Wide River’s products have garnered about 25 awards in mostly Midwestern competitions.

A shelf in the tasting room of the winery displays the medals the business has won, but O’Brien is not one to rest on her laurels. She’s too busy focusing on the future of the wine industry.

“I would very much like to cultivate the Gen Y-ers, or the Millennials,” she said. “Economically, you’re not going to be in business for the long haul if you’re only marketing towards baby boomers.”

O’Brien said some of the reasons she’s tried producing so many varieties of wines is the range of tastes that younger wine drinkers have, and the lack of set prejudices they have regarding certain kinds of wines.

“They have a sophisticated palate – in other words, they like all kinds of different things – and they can appreciate sweet and dry, and everything in between,” said O’Brien. “And they’re willing to try new flavors.”

Although the business has grown into a demanding enterprise over the past five years, O’Brien remains undaunted.

“I came in the house last night around 8 O’clock after working both jobs, and I thought, “Why am I doing this?” she said with a laugh. “But it’s just fun. And there’s so many different aspects of it, from the gardening, to the wine-making, to the business side, to the marketing. There’s just always something to engage you and always a challenge. So I like that.”

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