



Local vineyard ripens with age

By **LISA KELLY - The Woodstock Independent**

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How many people would have the patience to start a business knowing that the first finished product would not roll off the production line for more than two years?

Jeff Pankow of Woodstock is someone who apparently can. In the spring of 2008, he planted the grape vines that will yield the first crop for Blue Star Winery this fall.

"We should produce about 150 gallons of wine this fall," he said. "As it gets closer, (the project) just keeps getting bigger and better," Pankow said.

The vines take three full growing seasons to reach sufficient maturity for the grapes to produce wine. In the first year, they are planted and allowed to develop a strong root system - one that grows to about 6 feet.

In year two, Pankow drove posts in the ground between every three vines. Then he strung wire between the posts and placed a bamboo post for each. From there, it is possible to train the vine to grow around that structure.

In this the third year, the vine finally bears fruit. The grapes, unlike table grapes, are less sweet and more acidic.

None of this has been a random process for Pankow. An avid gardener, he has made his own beer for 15 years and wine for seven. He pursued those hobbies using kits and decided it was time to move on to the real thing.

"I really enjoyed the relationships I made in both of those pursuits but wanted to challenge myself with something more creative," he said. "So I decided to educate myself in the process."

Pankow is currently in his third year of an online, commercially-oriented course through Missouri State University. It covers both viticulture, the agricultural process of growing grapes, and enology, the actual production of wine.

"I wanted to minimize the expensive mistakes that can be so easy to make if you don't research your subject, so I decided to get a more formal education," he said. "And the courses are invaluable as they are specific to our climate conditions in the Midwest."

On his 30-acre parcel north of Woodstock in unincorporated McHenry County, his goal is to have a full acre of vines in each of the French/American hybrid varieties he is cultivating. They are: "Frontenac," which will produce a very versatile grape that can be made into a rose, sweet or dry red wine; "Le Crescent," for a semi-dry to sweet white dessert wine; and "Mareschal Foche" that will yield a dry red.

Currently, Pankow pursues his wine passion in the evenings and on weekends in addition to his full-time job. He heads up "Allied Spring and Manufacturing," a family-owned business based in Elk Grove Village.

"Ultimately, I hope the winery will be a full-time enterprise for me," he said. "After a year or so, I may have to hire some help as this business is extremely man-hour intensive with little in the way of equipment geared to an operation of this size."

But he has lots of assistance already. His wife Sue and their children, David and Lian, both 14, help out a lot, he said. And in May of this year, 73 friends, co-workers and local wine club members volunteered their time to plant 800 new vines.

In two years, Jeff hopes to build a winery and sales outlet close to the road to accommodate customers for his finished product. He acknowledges the realization of his dream as a long process necessarily involving patience but said he wouldn't trade his experience so far.

"Although I appreciate the romance in the concept of a winery, I look at it more as a business with a lot of potential," he said. "And if I can get people to come out and enjoy our wine, I'll be happy."

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