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# Tassel Ridge Blazes Trails in Leighton

By Renee Brinks

When Oskaloosa businessman Bob Wersen first considered building a winery back in the late 1990s, he came across some surprising numbers.

“I discovered, after doing a little research, that Iowans did not consume much wine. In fact, Iowans consume wine at a little more than half of the national average rate,” he says.

Instead of viewing those statistics as discouraging, Wersen saw an opportunity. He had some land, and he figured it was just a matter of time before wine grew in popularity here at home. He decided to give grape growing a shot.

Wersen certainly wasn't the first to plant vines in Iowa. The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship dates the state's industry back to 1857, when grapes were grown near Council Bluffs. Iowa ranked sixth in national production by 1919, and nearly 16 million pounds of grapes were harvested here at the industry's peak in 1929.

By 1999, as Wersen was planning his own vineyard, there were just 11 licensed wineries in the state. This year, that number has grown to more than 90. The Iowa Wine Growers Association now estimates the economic impact of Iowa's vineyard and wine industry at \$234.3 million.

One of the top-selling brands is Wersen's Tassel Ridge Winery.

The Tassel Ridge team began planting vines in the spring of 2002. During the two years and three months it took for those grapes to mature, Wersen looked at locations for a winery. He settled on 87 acres near Leighton, along Highway 163 between Oskaloosa and Pella. Convenient visitor access was a plus, but there were other advantages, too.

“It had decent traffic numbers,” Wersen says. “Initially, we weren't paying much attention to the soil condition. But, the more we investigated, the clearer it became that we had a really good site for growing grapes.”

Winery construction wrapped up as the first Tassel Ridge harvest began, and the tasting room was completed the following year. Today, almost a decade after the earliest vines took root, Wersen also grows grapes on two more parcels within a few miles of the original two. Because of Iowa's climate, the varieties are different from the familiar ones raised in more established wine regions such as the Napa and Sonoma Valleys.

“We're somewhat restricted in the types of grapes we can grow in Iowa,” Wersen says. “We can't grow *vinifera*, which is the family name for the grape varieties that are grown in California. They won't survive our cold winters, and they also won't ripen in our short growing season. Our season is almost two months shorter than California's.”

Humidity presents another problem, regardless of how long the growing season lasts. Iowa's sticky summers leave vineyards susceptible to mold. That means growers here fare better with fungus-resistant varieties.

Given such obstacles, many Hawkeye State wine producers find themselves blazing new trails.

“The challenge is that we can't grow the varieties that have been the object of most of the grape growing research in the U.S. over the last 40-50 years,” Wersen explains. “We are pioneers, in that sense. Some of the rules that apply in a dry climate, like California, just don't apply in a humid climate.”

Tassel Ridge has found success with the early-harvest, fruit-forward Edelweiss grape. The winery also maintains significant plantings of St. Croix, La Crescent and Frontenac, among other varieties. Wersen and his team aim to create blends that best highlight the qualities of these distinct grapes by experimenting with growing methods, harvest times and cellaring techniques.

He calls it “the intellectual process of designing our wines.”

“Rather than using another winery or other wines as the North Star, I'm constantly looking at what our grapes are doing and trying to figure out how we can make that into the very best possible wine,” says Wersen.

The strategy seems to be working for Tassel Ridge, which currently sells some 14,000 cases of wine annually. Guided by consumer preference, the winery first launched with several sweet and semi-sweet wines. These flavors are typically a comfortable point-of-entry for new wine drinkers, and the grapes used in semi-sweet wines also do well in Iowa's growing conditions.

Since then, the Tassel Ridge portfolio has expanded to include carbonated fizzy wines, dessert wines and, most recently, dry red and white blends. As new releases roll out, awards roll in. This year alone, the winery has earned recognition in the Dallas Morning News Wine Competition,

Finger Lakes International Wine Competition, Florida State Fair International Wine Competition and the Grand Harvest Wine Competition.

In July, Tassel Ridge Winery earned 14 medals at the 5th annual Mid-American Wine Competition. Challengers included more than 530 wines from 82 wineries in 14 Midwestern states. One of the gold medals went to Red, White & Blue, a sweet red blend of Concord and Catawba grapes. The wine is Tassel Ridge's top seller; it is also a popular choice at Mystic Casino in Dubuque.

"People who try Tassel Ridge wines really like them," says food and beverage director John Torres. His staff members pour several Tassel Ridge releases in the casino's signature restaurant, Champagne, and on the gaming floor. In addition to Red, White & Blue, guests often order the semi-sweet Prelude and In the Dark, a dry red.

Torres visited several wineries before selecting Tassel Ridge for his facility. He was impressed with the commitment to producing grapes grown in Iowa, and he believes that the wines offer good value.

"For a smaller winery, they are very consistent and they've got great flavor," he says.

While Wersen would like to see his wines in more Iowa restaurants, he has made headway with the state's retailers. Tassel Ridge is available in more than 400 outlets, including gift shops, liquor stores and major chains such as HyVee and Fareway. Through the Tassel Ridge Winery ambassador program, representatives hold tastings at each retail location to build brand awareness and introduce customers to wines they might not otherwise sample.

"People can taste our wine, and if they like it, they can buy a bottle right there at that time. If they take it home and like it and want to buy another bottle later, they know where to go. It gives people some familiarity," Wersen says.

During the summer season, wine education continues at the source. Guests can hop aboard the Tassel Ridge Grapemobile, a tractor-pulled passenger trailer, for a tour of the vineyards and a discussion of growing practices and production. Winery tours also highlight Iowa's grape-growing history, planting and harvesting, blending, bottling and more.

"The winery has been designed in such a way that a visitor's gallery overlooks the cellars, and you can look down and see the tanks. If it's a working day, you can see what people are doing. The back window looks out onto the crushpad, and during harvest, in particular, people can see the whole process," explains Wersen.

As they sample the latest blends at the tasting bar, guests can chart their options on a map that organizes Tassel Ridge wines by body and sweetness.

"It helps them understand their taste profile. If someone tastes a wine that they like, they will probably want to taste the other wines around it," Wersen says.

Tassel Ridge representatives regularly share such big-picture information during tastings, demonstrations and special events.

"We focus on education and showing people how they can incorporate wine into their diets. We want people to know that if they're having pizza, there are a couple of wines that they might consider with that pizza, for example," says Wersen. "It's really working well for us."

The winery also offers pairing suggestions and recipes on its website and in its e-newsletter, along with event listings, award announcements and updates on what's happening in the vineyards. This spring, Tassel Ridge expanded its outreach by launching a new quarterly magazine titled, "Simply Extraordinary." In addition to connecting with consumers via active Facebook and Twitter profiles, the winery will provide a behind-the-scenes look at growing, production and new releases via a soon-to-be-launched video series, as well.

Some of the biggest news out of Tassel Ridge Winery is the upcoming release of wine made with the Marquette grape, a hybrid developed by researchers at the University of Minnesota. The cold-climate variety has pinot noir in its family tree, and Wersen calls it a grape that is "virtually indestructible and grows very vigorously." He expects to release the first bottles of dry red in early 2012.

"The wine has a very nice tannic backbone," says Wersen. "It has a significantly full mouthfeel with dark fruit notes – plum and black cherry, for example – and we think it's going to be comparable to some of the bigger dry red wines made in the Napa Valley or the Rhone Valley in France. It's fruitier than those, but has a lot of body."

Tassel Ridge is leading Iowa wineries in growing and bottling Marquette grapes, and it's that kind of innovation that helps the winery thrive.

"It is really exciting being a pioneer. You never know what the next challenge is going to be when you come to work every day," Wersen says. "I'm just gratified that we've made as much progress as we have. I feel like we're doing a lot of the right things and we're doing them right the first time. We have plenty of room to improve, but so far things are coming together pretty well."

## When you go...

### Tassel Ridge Winery

1681 220th Street - Leighton  
641.672.WINE - TasselRidge.com

## Pairing Suggestions from Tassel Ridge Winery

*Capitalize on the unique flavors of Tassel Ridge wines by pairing them with your favorite dishes:*

### Sweet and Semi-Sweet Wines

American Pink Catawba: Teriyaki chicken, Cajun dishes, picnic fare and sushi

Iowa Prairie Snow: Fruit cobblers and fresh fruits

Oskyfizzante White: Appetizers, antipasto, cream sauces, fresh fruit and sushi

Prelude: Salads, appetizers, cheeses and spicy foods

### Dry Whites

American Dry Riesling: Seafood, salads, poultry, appetizers, soft cheeses and cream sauces

Candleglow White: Grilled pork, grilled seafood, poultry and soft cheeses

Iowa White Blossom: Spicy Asian foods, jerk-seasoned pork and fruit salsas

### Dry Reds

In the Dark: Grilled and full-flavored meats

Pizzeria & Pasta Too!: Pizza and pasta with tomato-based sauces

Twilight: Beef, grilled pork, bold cheeses and grilled vegetables

### Dessert Wines

Chocolate Granfinalé: Cheesecake, fruit desserts and nut tortes

Finalé Blackberry: Chocolate desserts and cheesecake

Finalé Premier Red: Dark chocolate, blue cheese and cashews