

# North country winemakers seeing fruit of their labors after 'crazy' idea

By M.B. Pell  
Times Staff Writer

In 1998, Duane A. Smith called a few Finger Lakes vineyard owners seeking advice as to what species of grapes he could plant at his Evans Mills home to produce a tasty wine. The response: unabashed laughter.

"They've been supportive since then, but when we first started they were like, 'Hey, are you guys crazy?'" Mr. Smith said. "They couldn't believe we were trying to grow grapes up here."

But in the past six years, Mr. Smith, who now owns a small vine nursery adjacent to his home, has worked with a group of local wine enthusiasts to patiently take the first steps toward growing a viticulture industry in Jefferson County that has

recently begun to bear fruit.

The Thousand Islands Winery in Collins Landing, owned by Stephen J. Conaway, his wife, Erika S., and Frank and Michele Mayer, opened in the fall of 2003, and will increase its production by 592 percent over last year, from 1,300 gallons in 2004 to 9,000 gallons in 2005. Nicholas Surdo plans to start making wine commercially at the Yellow Barn Winery in Sackets Harbor next year, and Rick R. Hafferman anticipates that his son Kyle will start processing grapes grown by the elder Mr. Hafferman at the Otter Creek Winery, Philadelphia, in 2006.

And the wineries are just the most visible aspect of a burgeoning enterprise that could boost the region's tourism and agriculture industries.

Property owners have begun to plant vine-

yards on small parcels of fallow farmland, not to set up their own wineries, but to sell grapes to men like Mr. Conaway.

"I've told people already, any grape you can produce, I'll buy," said Mr. Conaway, who buys the vast majority of his juice from Finger Lakes producers. "Right now there's already a shortage of grapes because in the next two years there will be three wineries needing grapes, and now there's only two producers."

Starting vineyards in Jefferson County is no longer considered a ludicrous proposition, thanks to grape breeding programs at the University of Minnesota Excelsior campus and the establishment of a local nursery.

See North — Page B7

## NNY vines have roots in Minnesota

By M.B. Pell  
Times Staff Writer

Starting a viticulture industry in Jefferson County has taken hard work by many local grape growers, but long before vine one was planted here, researchers at the University of Minnesota were on the case.

"Our wineries have their roots in Minnesota," said Duane A. Smith, who owns a vine nursery

in Evans Mills.

Peter R. Hemstad, a research viticulturist at the Horticulture Research Center at the University of Minnesota's Excelsior campus, said Minnesota was the only university in the country to breed vines to survive in cold-weather climates because most schools with fruit programs are in warm-weather areas like California.

See Roots — Page B7