

# Business strong at 3 Jefferson County wineries

**DEVELOPING A FOLLOWING:** Owners planning expansions, say wine trail, tastings, tourism help

By RACHAEL HANLEY  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

At Ronson's Gold Star Liquors Inc. on Arsenal Street, customers often walk in and ask for bottles from Thousand Islands Winery.

Demand for local wines has picked up in the past two years, company President Kristina M. Ronson said. Between Oct. 1 and Dec. 12, her store sold 32 bottles of the Alexandria Bay winery's North Country Red.

"Most people come in and ask for the Thousand Island wines

just by name," Ms. Ronson said. "A lot of times they'll tell me they've visited the winery."

The experience at Ronson's hints at what the three area wineries have known for some time — local vintages may be young, but they're rapidly developing a large and devoted following.

Thousand Islands, Yellow Barn Winery in Hounsfield and Otter Creek Winery in Philadelphia produce very new vintages by wine industry standards. Thousand Islands began in

2003, Yellow Barn in 2006 and Otter Creek in April.

Despite their youth, all three wineries have found a market for their wines stronger than they imagined. Most report an increase in business of between 30 percent and 40 percent in the past year, demand that is prompting an increase of production and storage capacity for next season.

Winery employees and local experts attribute this success to various factors: the May opening of the 78-mile Thousand Is-

lands-Seaway Wine Trail, popular wine-tasting events and their proximity to tourist destinations and universities. Unusual local wine varieties, such as the blueberry Seaway Blues or apple-cranberry Harvest Blend, have proved particularly popular.

"In the long run, Jefferson County has a lot to bring people here," said Jay M. Matteson, Jefferson County agricultural coordinator. "And I think the wineries and the wine trail are going to make it that much better. I really

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Richard R. Hafemann stands outside Otter Creek Winery in Philadelphia, where he helps son Kyle R., the owner. They plan to add a building.

## Wineries in Jefferson County see sales rise...

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think those wineries have the potential to become part of the mainstay of the tourism industry in Jefferson County."

Demand from the wineries already has fed into the local economy. According to figures from the Seaway Wine and Viticulture Association and Mr. Matteson, there are 17 vineyards in Jefferson County with an average size of two acres. Together, these vineyards have about 18,000 vines, with an additional 3,000 vines growing in St. Lawrence and Lewis counties. Once mature, each vine can produce about a gallon of grape juice or wine.

Thousand Islands Winery supplements its own 8 acres of grapes by purchasing fruit and juice from farms in the north country, Long Island and the Finger Lakes region, winery administrator Roxy L. Raymo said.

Having started with two full-time employees, the winery now employs seven people year-round. Thousand Islands has used a Web site, wine-tasting events and stands at festivals and 17 farmers markets to spread word of its product.

It seems this marketing strategy is paying off, with a roughly 40 percent growth in customers at the winery in the past year, Ms. Raymo said. Orders from the Internet have doubled.

Such rapid growth has strained the facilities, Ms. Raymo said. Thousand Islands plans to build a new production facility

ery's output from 33,000 gallons to more than 100,000 gallons.

"It's pretty exciting; next year shows to be even more promising," she said. "We're busting at the seams, producing wine that we need only as we need it. Storage is a huge issue."

Otter Creek Winery in Philadelphia has similar plans to expand, said Richard R. Hafemann, an employee at the winery and father of owner Kyle R. Hafemann.

The winery, which started this year with a 2,000-square-foot barn with a tasting room, is planning a second 5,000-square-foot structure for next year.

Mr. Hafemann said the new structure will feature a place to crush grapes and store a 14-foot-tall harvester, along with more room to produce and store wine.

The winery has seen business grow 10 percent to 15 percent each month, despite having the road to the location closed over the summer, Mr. Hafemann said.

"People still plowed their way here," he said. "The wine trail has become a huge tourist attraction. I don't think even the three wineries knew it was going to turn out to be what it is."

Otter Creek sold out of its apple-cranberry wine and 120 gallons of Frontenac, Mr. Hafemann said. Next year, his son has plans to up overall production from 1,970 gallons to 4,950 gallons. Construction of a pavilion overlooking the winery grounds has been postponed so the winery can expand.

Mr. Hafemann said much of the traffic stems from parents stopping along Route 11 after driving their children to colleges in St. Lawrence County.

Tourism also has been a huge driving factor, since opening in April. Otter Creek has had people from 21 states and three Canadian provinces sign its guest book.

"He's going to have to start hiring help," Mr. Hafemann said of his son. "That's a good thing; the whole industry's creating jobs."

Nicholas D. Surdo, owner of Yellow Barn Winery on Route 66, also has seen an increase in business, particularly from Canadians.

"Most of them like dry wine. They also enjoy our dessert wine," he said. "We're running very low. We don't produce that much wine."

Mr. Surdo started with 1,200 bottles this year; he has run out of large bottles of Mill Creek Red and is coming to the end of the Frontenac. He said a conservative estimate of the increase in business would be 30 percent in the last year.

Unlike the others, Mr. Surdo still has room to expand production within his existing structures. Rather than dramatically increase production, though, Mr. Surdo will continue to focus on experimental grapes and new varieties of wine. Next year, with the support of the other two wineries, Mr. Surdo plans to take his wine to several summer festivals.

"You can't buy our wines in the store," he said. "Once people come in here and taste our product, they like it and come back."

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