

Growing a winery



The Massey Vineyard is one of several at Thousand Islands Winery that are named after former owners.

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Entrepreneur works hard, works smart to succeed in a tough industry

ALEXANDRIA BAY — The formula for making good wine is simple: good grapes, grown on the right soil with plenty of sunlight and care. Mix in some careful wine-making and gentle aging, and you have something drinkable.

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But if you're in Northern New York, you need to add a large dose of courage as well.

Stephen J. Conaway, founder and owner of the Thousand Islands Winery on Seaway Avenue, brought his courage with him when he retired from the 10th Mountain Division in 2003 and started his winery at a location that conventional wisdom said was doomed to failure. So far, courage wins.

Mr. Conaway conceived the idea of establishing a winery from his experience with the wineries and castles he saw when stationed in Germany. When he arrived in Jefferson County to serve at Fort Drum, he saw Boldt Castle in the St. Lawrence River and knew this was where he wanted to launch his winery.



Thousand Islands Winery owner Stephen J. Conaway and administrator Roxy Raymo toast the newly released Frontenac in the vineyard in which it was grown.

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Of course, everyone who really knew about wineries was quick to tell him it was too far north. His grapes wouldn't grow, and his customers would never find him.

Instead of heeding these warnings and getting a job on post, Mr. Conaway did some research.

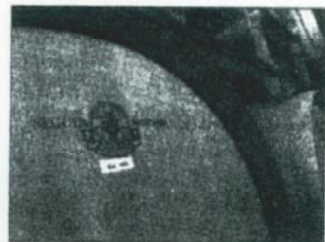
"I found some wineries in Quebec," he said. "When I called them up, they said they used cold-hardy grape varieties and it worked fine. I decided if they can make wine in Quebec, I can

do it much farther south, in Clayton."

As it turns out, the northern climate may be a challenge for some grape varieties, but it saves the winery serious money on refrigeration costs.

Latitude was not his only problem, however. California wine entrepreneur Robert Mondavi is credited with a wry description of how to make a small fortune in the wine business — start with a large fortune and buy a winery.

Mr. Conway had to establish a win-



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Thousand Islands wine ages in a dark storage facility on the Alexandria Bay property.

ery that could make good wine, but one that could make a profit as well.

At least part of the secret to that effort was in careful management of costs. He renovated an old barn and has been slow and careful about buying equipment.

"We never buy anything new," he said. "I watch for sales and auctions and visit other wineries to pick up good used equipment. Everything we found on the property we're trying to renovate," Mr. Conaway said.

He said he learned that trick from his service in Afghanistan, where the local people never throw anything away: "When an Afghani throws something out, you know it has no use left in it at all."

Along with careful cost manage-