

# PROGRESS 2007

## Tassel Ridge Winery celebrates first anniversary

Tassel Ridge Winery celebrates its first anniversary on May 12, 2007. The Winery, located at 1681 220th St. in Leighton first opened to the public for tours, tasting, and events in May 2006. Since then, nearly 2,500 people have visited and many now return regularly.

The Winery is located on a ridge about four miles northwest of Oskaloosa just south of State Highway 163. The ridge is just high enough that on a clear night you can see all the way to Pella in one direction and Oskaloosa in the other. The rolling nature of Iowa's landscape is immediately evident from the Winery. And maybe because of its height, there always seems to be a breeze blowing at Tassel Ridge Winery.

Although most visitors come from Mahaska, Marion, and Wapello counties and Des Moines and its surrounding counties, Tassel Ridge Winery has had visitors from Germany, France, China, Korea and Australia. Visitors have commented on the wide range of high quality wines, the informative tour, the views, the landscaping which is still in its infancy, and how welcome they all felt when they arrived at the Winery.

### Tassel Ridge Winery owners and their vision

Tassel Ridge Winery was created and built by owners Bob and Sharman Wersen. Their vision is to reach wine consumers in Southeast Iowa with wines that they like and will consume on a regular basis. This means that the Winery must make and offer dry, food pairing wines AND sweet, easy drinking wines with several semi-sweet wines in the middle. In fact, the Wersens define a quality wine as a product that people like well enough to buy and consume on a regular basis.

Bob Wersen said, "Our approach to winemaking and consumption is the opposite of the pretentious, judgment-filled approach common in the Napa Valley. One day in January a couple of years ago, I was in the tasting room of a famous Napa Valley winery when a young couple approached the tasting bar and hesitatingly asked if the winery offered a pink wine that tasted fruity. The man behind the bar laughed and said that they should leave to go to the closest convenience store if they wanted a soda! This response was especially ironic considering that this particular winery is most famous for its semi-sweet pink wine."

Wersen continued, "Many people don't know what kinds of wine they like. At Tassel Ridge, we offer a wide selection of wines ranging from dry to sweet. Our visitors have the

opportunity to taste up to four of these wines to determine which they like best. And, our tasting room staff is committed to making each guest's visit informative and pleasant."

And, why would the Wersens make a major investment in growing grapes and making wine in Southeast Iowa? Bob quickly points out that there is opportunity in making and selling wine that people like. Americans in general are consuming more wine and less beer and spirits. Last year, Americans consumed 12 bottles of wine per person and forecasters project that number to increase to 15 by 2010. By that time, the U.S. will have become the biggest wine market in the world. The French and Italians will continue to consume wine at a rate of 80 bottles per person per year.

The per person rate of wine consumption in Iowa and other Midwestern States is low, at about 5 bottles per person, and that represents the opportunity. There are many signs that this rate of consumption is about to increase. The Wersens believe that the wineries that will benefit from this increase will effectively listen to their customers' preferences while they demonstrate how wine can be paired with food to make each taste better. An increase in consumption of only one bottle per person would be enough to double the size of the entire native Iowa wine industry.

### Friendly, Knowledgeable Staff Welcomes Visitors to Tassel Ridge Winery

Brian Babcock, Tasting Room Manager, has overall responsibility for assuring that visitors have a memorable experience at Tassel Ridge Winery. He is in charge of the tasting room and gift shop, and he supervises the Winery's friendly, knowledgeable tasting room staff. Jean McKay, Tammy Rempe, Paul Keferl, Arvin Pleima, Keith Brooks and Aaron Backlin greet visitors, lead tours, pour samples at the tasting bar, and assist visitors in the gift shop.

Tassel Ridge Winery's skilled winemaking team crafts quality wines. Winemaker, Brett Hay, has a degree in enology from Adelaide University in South Australia and has worked at wineries in Australia and California. Rhonda Taylor, Assistant Winemaker, has a degree in Biology from Iowa State University. She was the manager of the medical lab at a local hospital before joining the winemaking team. Rhonda manages the production schedule and keeps track of the various wine batches. She also performs many of the lab tests



photo provided

Tassel Ridge Winery, located near Leighton, celebrates its first anniversary on May 12.

that assure Tassel Ridge consistently produces quality wines. Cellar Technician, Jim Carmichael, an ISU grad and former fermentation technologist, keeps the cellar running. He is in charge of all of the machinery along with safety, quality, and sanitation at the Winery.

Sarah Thompson, a recent Central College graduate, is Public Relations Manager and Events Coordinator. She is responsible for media relations and organizing events at the Winery and other locations. Sarah also assists with the design of advertising, custom labels, and other winery literature. Sales Manager, Deb Newell, selects the retailers and restaurants that sell and serve Tassel Ridge wines. She then provides them with ongoing support including staff training, tasting programs, and promotional assistance.

### New Programs at Tassel Ridge Winery

Tassel Ridge Winery focused initially on providing an informative tour that shows visitors how wine is made from grapes. Over the next year, improvements on the Winery tour will be rolled out regularly. In addition, a vineyard tour will be started in the fall. There will be a nominal charge for the vineyard tour. The winery tour will continue to be free.

Visitors and customers will find the gift shop to be the perfect place to purchase locally produced wine and related items. The Winery's plans call for a steady stream of improvements in the gift shop with additional items, wine-related displays, and information about cold climate grape varieties being added this year.

The Winery site is a great place for picnics. The

gift shop will be offering packaged meats and cheeses, French bread, wine, and other beverages to enjoy at the tables with umbrellas on the terrace or on a blanket on the lawn.

Tassel Ridge Winery can ship wine within the State of Iowa and to 11 other states including California, Florida, and several states adjacent to Iowa. The Winery cannot ship wine out of the U.S.

Later this year, Tassel Ridge is planning to offer wine appreciation classes. The Winery is uniquely qualified to offer a program like this because attendees can see up close every aspect of winemaking from growing the grapes to processing them into wine and then putting the wine into bottles. How about a multi-course dinner with a different wine for each course right out in the vineyard? Or, perhaps a dessert program in which dessert wines and appropriate foods are paired to bring out the best in both the wines and the foods. And, because some wines go well with chocolate, a range of dark chocolates selected to pair well with Tassel Ridge's Finalé dessert wines have already been added in the gift shop with more on the way.

Finally, when you start to plan that big wedding anniversary, a wedding or rehearsal dinner, or maybe a big zero birthday, what about custom labeled wine with a photo of the person

or people involved? The Winery staff can help you design the perfect custom labels for your special occasion.

### Where do Tassel Ridge Winery grapes come from?

Tassel Ridge grows a lot of the grapes they use to make their wine. Tassel Ridge has three vineyards: one at the Winery, and Meadowcreek Vineyards just north of William Penn University, and Newport Lane Vineyards at the north end of Newport Avenue.

Because of Iowa's cold winter temperatures and short growing season, familiar grape varieties like Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio, Riesling, etc. can't be grown here. These varieties will generally survive minimum winter temperatures of -5°F; however they usually need at least 210 days between frosts to ripen. Mahaska County has only about 150 days between frosts.

As a result, so-called "cold climate" varieties that are crosses between native American grape varieties and *Vitis Vinifera* are grown in Iowa. These varieties get their cold climate resistance and fast maturity characteristics from the native American varieties and their juice quality from the European or *Vinifera* varieties.

The most important variety in terms of acres plant-

ed in the Tassel Ridge vineyards is Edelweiss. These vines are planted just east of the Winery, and the grapes from them will produce a very flavorful white wine. Important red wine varieties grown in the Tassel Ridge vineyards include St. Croix, Sabrevois, Marechal Foch, Frontenac, and Marquette which is being planted at Meadowcreek Vineyards this year. Tassel Ridge also grows St. Pepin, La Crosse, Vignoles, and Brianna which are used to make white wine.

Tassel Ridge has 44 acres of vines planted. Vines begin producing harvestable grapes in the third year. Last year, Tassel Ridge harvested 31 tons of grapes from about 22 acres of third-year-or-older vines. That was not enough for the Winery's production level, so Tassel Ridge also purchased about 90 tons of fruit from growers in California.

### Tassel Ridge Retail locations

The staff of Tassel Ridge Winery would love to see all of their customers at the Winery but they know that busy schedules don't always permit trips to the tasting room. They have added about 35 retail locations in Southeast Iowa. The full list can be found at [www.tasselridge.com](http://www.tasselridge.com). In Oskaloosa, C-B Liquor, Hy-Vee, and Wigg's carry Tassel Ridge wines.

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