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VEGAS VINTNERS

Do-it-yourself wine operation gains footing in Clark County

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It didn't exactly take an act of Congress to get the Grape Expectations Nevada School of Winemaking up and running, but Clark County's first wine-producing business did need an assist from the Nevada Legislature.

It's been a tortuous path to entrepreneurship for Charlie and Patty Peters, who first thought of opening a do-it-yourself wine operation several years ago after visiting a similar company in New Jersey. The couple spent eight hours at the wine school sampling the beverages, and Charlie Peters decided the business was "custom-made" for the couple.

"It was fun, and my wife and our friends and family are all about having a good time," Peters said.

So when the couple returned home, Peters retained an attorney to study the possibility of establishing a wine-making school in Las Vegas.

The news wasn't encouraging: Peters would need a winery license, and Nevada law banned wineries in counties with more than 100,000 residents. The few wine makers that dotted the state all met the rule. Nye County, home to the Pahrump Valley Winery, had about 45,000 residents, while Churchill County, which harbors Churchill Vineyards near Fallon, had roughly 25,000 full-timers. Tahoe Ridge Winery in Minden is in Douglas County, which had 50,000 or so residents.

"We were a little dejected," said Peters, "but I thought we should go down swinging."

Peters contacted his representative in the Nevada Senate, Terry Care, D-Las Vegas, during the state's 2005 legislative session. Care enlisted the help of Nevada Sen. Mike Schneider, D-Las Vegas, a wine aficionado who once changed a state law that prohibited bringing more than three bottles of wine into Nevada. To help Peters' business, Schneider sponsored a 2005 bill that revised state law to allow "instructional wine-making facilities" sans winery license in any county.

"I understood what Charlie wanted to do, and I thought it was a great idea," Schneider said. "Wine is a hot novelty item, and this (business) had that whole aspect of making your own wine, of blending it and saying, 'I made this myself.' "

Both the Senate and the Assembly enacted Schneider's law unanimously, with lawmakers and lobbyists alike telling Schneider they couldn't wait to try out Grape Expectations themselves. Even two years later, during the 2007 session, colleagues were asking Schneider if he knew when the business might open.

But before it could launch, Grape Expectations had to maneuver obstacles beyond state regulations.

The do-it-yourself wine concept was new to the Las Vegas Valley, so Peters had to work hard to sell the idea to commercial lenders, and municipal officials took some time to weigh licensing requests. And because there's a limited window in the fall during which grapes are harvested, financing and licensing that failed to materialize by early summer would push the company's opening to the following year.

"Nobody else had ever had a business like this here, so there was no rubber stamp for anything we were doing," Peters said.

Steve Johnson, a vice president at Bank of Nevada, decided to take a chance on Grape Expectations. Johnson said he loaned money to the business after he saw the due diligence Peters had performed.

"I thought it was kind of a crazy idea, but Charlie was very prepared with his business plan," Johnson said. "It wasn't something he just thought of a month ago. He planned it for years."

All that effort paid off in June, when Grape Expectations opened in 3,200 square feet at 1971 Whitney Mesa Drive. Peters gave up his job overseeing food-and-beverage functions at Cascata, a golf course in Boulder City, to work on the business full time. His wife, Patty, helps out when she's not on the job as a certification specialist with the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department.

Customers who visit Grape Expectations will begin on the ground floor of the wine-making process, choosing red or white California grapes from the Amador, Mendocino, Lake County, Sonoma and Lodi areas. When patrons arrive to make their wine, they'll find 756 pounds of grapes waiting; they'll load the fruit into a crusher and destemmer, and pump the resulting product into fermentation tubs. Another pressing follows a week or two later, and the wine is then loaded into a 53-gallon barrel for eight months of aging. Each barrel yields 240 bottles of wine, which customers can adorn with personalized labels. The price: about \$2,100 per barrel, or \$8.70 a bottle. Peters also offers half-barrel options, and customers can band together in groups to defray the cost, he said.

Peters' goal is to sell 300 barrels of wine by summer 2008. He's marketing to corporations looking for team-building activities and to wedding parties, among other potential customers. He plans to limit the company's output "to keep the experience very intimate."

Most of Grape Expectations' customers thus far have been friends and family of the Peterses, but the wine school could have some new visitors soon.

Schneider said he'd "definitely" try making his own wine, and Johnson said he's considering taking his department at Bank of Nevada to Grape Expectations for a corporate function. Schneider also expects a spate of lobbyists, attorneys and other professionals to hold wine-making parties, complete with hors d'oeuvres.

"It's really going to be a lot of fun for a lot of people," Schneider said. "I think Charlie's going to be a huge success once people find out about Grape Expectations."

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