



## TODAY'S SUNBEAM

### Friends turn vineyard dream into reality

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PILESGROVE TWP. Out of Salem County's fertile grounds a new breed of farmer is ripening, and dreaming that one day their homegrown brand of wines will have a place alongside the heralded staples like Jersey tomatoes and corn.

The three couples that comprise the recently opened Auburn Road Vineyards represent a change of direction in an agricultural community whose numbers have only dwindled in the face of uncertain economic futures and suburban sprawl. The owners, who opened their vineyards to the public just before Thanksgiving, are finally seeing the fruits of their labor after first planting the grapes in 2003.

Beginning a unique venture into agri-tourism, the owners now have six and-a-half acres of crops that have produced roughly 3,000 gallons of wine this year. With a winery and tasting room already on-site, future plans include a bocce ball court and live music featuring local artists.

While a group of patrons sip wine at the enoteca a converted barn that is now a relaxing, clean and classy place to taste the products co-owner Scott Donnini explained that the partners were just a group of friends looking for a "way out." They purchased about 16 acres of ground on Sharptown-Auburn Road, a close drive from U.S. Route 40 but far enough to be out of earshot of the traffic.

"We all had day jobs, and a bunch of years ago we were all just sitting around drinking wine and thought, there must be a better way to live our lives," Scott said. "So thinking we had a really unique idea, we decided to start a vineyard."

It began as an experiment of Scott and his roommate Dave Davis inside their Philadelphia apartment in 2002, when they bought an "idiot-proof" home wine-making kit and put up a trellis inside a space of just a few square feet. Although their first wine was admittedly terrible, it planted seeds in their heads for a full-fledged winery operation.

Scott, who has just turned 40, still continues his full-time employment as a lawyer and put in a lot of nights and weekends to turn the pasture into a sanctuary, as have all the owners. Donnini said they are all "psychotically hard-working people" who have found a niche in the trade.

"It started with books. I've read books and books and books on how to make wine and how to prune. It's a lot of practice and talking to experts and attending conferences," said Julianne Donnini, Scott's wife, who is a lawyer turned wine maker.

Julianne and Scott said that local experts have been very helpful, and he was surprised to find an entire wine culture in the area. Scott explained that wineries like Auburn Road Vineyards are popping up all over the place, farmers with a real passion for what they grow.

He said he has assimilated into the local culture quite happily, and wears with a certain amount of pride and commitment the cowboy boots to prove it.

"Coming from the city I never realized how beautiful it was down here before moving and getting to know

the area. I went to the rodeo, I went to the Salem County Fair ... It's just beautiful," Scott said. "I think we are doing our part to maintain these open spaces. I'd like to think they will outlive me."

The wine, which comes in six different varieties including Classico, Merlot, Pinot Grigio, Sole, Chardonnay and a signature red wine called Good Karma, can compete in price and taste with anything on the shelves, the owners believe.

According to Scott, the conditions of southern New Jersey are very similar to those found in Bordeaux, France, one of the premier wine-producing regions in the world. And a lot closer.

The most important thing for Scott was to find something he enjoyed doing and make it happen. All the work the planting, pruning and harvesting is done by the owners and a few friends and family. He explained that the labor of his hands and the sun on his back has been a dream come true of sorts for a man who has grown weary of the white collar life.

"My job as a lawyer for a brokerage firm is legal briefs and numerical figures. You work hard but it seems you are not working to produce something meaningful," Scott said. "We are pushing papers that never get there, and I had to ask myself What have I accomplished?' Now I can see the results of my efforts, and in the end you have a bottle of wine to drink because of it."

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