

Countryman's Estate Winery Markets Wine in LCBO Stores

Although less than two years old, Countryman's Estate Winery already has one of its 14 brands of fine wine being marketed in regional LCBO stores.

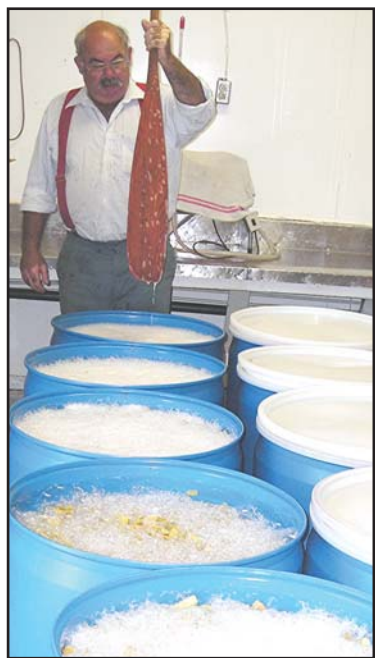
The winery east of Brockville also holds the distinction of being the first licensed winery in Leeds and Grenville as well as the 1000 Islands region and is the first fruit winery in Eastern Ontario.

But perhaps the most amazing aspect of the winery is that it was started by accident through extreme weather conditions coupled with inquiries from some curious customers.

Countryman's Winery was developed by Gene and Marsha Countryman in partnership with their son, Eli. Officially opened on June 10, 2006, the winery already markets several varieties of wine including Raspberry Raisin, Crab Apple, Watermelon, Honey Dew Melon, Strawberry, Strawberry Delight, Wild Pear, Cranberry, Blueberry, Cantaloupe, Iced Strawberry and Black Current.

The Countryman family is particularly proud of its signature Strawberry Delight wine. That wine has been approved by the Fruit Wineries of Ontario and, in Dec. of 2007, was accepted for sale in 25 LCBO stores from Kingston to Cornwall to Ottawa.

"Our Strawberry Delight wine is something entirely different and officials at the LCBO have indicated to us they are satisfied with the volume of sales of the product," said Eli Countryman.



Gene Countryman, proprietor of Countryman's Estate Winery prepares a batch of rhubarb wine at the winery east of Brockville

Riding on the success of its Strawberry Delight, Countryman's Estate Winery is already seeking approval for more varieties of wine to be marketed in LCBO stores including a Frosted Strawberry Iced wine made from pure, fresh frozen strawberries.

Plans are also being made to introduce Augusta Mystique, a dry, red wine that is actually a blend of five different wines. Gene Countryman has spent "a great deal of time in my laboratory" trying different blends until arriving at the formula for Augusta Mystique which is "really special."

"After 40 years of chasing cows I found out I had a talent I didn't know I had," chuckled the veteran farmer.

"We hope to have Frosted Strawberry Iced and Augusta Mystique in LCBO stores by August or possibly even sooner," said Eli Countryman.

When it was initially opened, Countryman's Estate Winery offered wines made from peach and watermelon but other varieties soon followed.

In the spring of 2006, Countryman Gardens were producing hydroponic English cucumbers in their greenhouses. They were turned into a light, dry wine called Garden Salad, a house specialty that has proven to be a good selling brand. It will soon be available at the winery for this season.

"People were amazed when we told them the wine was made from cucumbers," said Eli Countryman.

Another house specialty is Tomato n Spice wine made from ripe, frozen tomatoes. When squeezed, liquid from the tomatoes runs off clear allowing the winery to produce a clear, white wine from the crop. It has become the fourth best selling brand at the winery.

New varieties will soon be introduced by the winery including elderberry wine this summer. Another specialty wine will be made from Lingonberries which grow on a low bush and are a variation of domesticated cranberries and blueberries. Lingonberries look like blueberries but not as tart. Rhubarb wine is expected to be available by late spring.

Also in the spring, the winery will have its Wild Grape wine available. A heavy, full-bodied, dark red wine, the Wild Grape is produced from naturally wild grown grapes. A majority of the wines produced at the winery come from organically-grown fruits.

"There are misconceptions about fruit wine as being really sweet, syrupy, thick and heavy bodied," said Eli Countryman.

"Our wines are dryer, crispier with better acidic balance."

"They are legitimate wines," he said.

"Our wines are guaranteed not to bite but they do have a kick," points out Marsha Countryman.

Wines produced at Countryman's Estate Winery are between 10 to 15 per cent in

alcohol content by volume. Aside from providing "a kick," there is a side benefit of the higher than average alcohol content which results in the lower use of sulfite in the wine-making process. Higher sulfite levels found in other wines will sometimes cause consumers to experience headaches after drinking them.

Fruit wines also retain all their nutritional value that in the original fruit or vegetables from which they are made.

"If you have a glass of fruit wine you will receive all of the nutritional value you would receive eating a bowl of fruit," he said.

Fruit wines contain antioxidants and cancer prevention agents. Eli Countryman also points to a European health journal that published a study which found a glass of fruit wine consumed once a day by men over 50 is a factor in the prevention of prostate cancer.

Gene and Marsha Countryman have farmed for 40 years and are well known for their market garden operation in Augusta Township where they produce fruit and vegetables.

A "tremendous crop" of strawberries in 2005 proved to be both a curse and a blessing in disguise for the family. In June of that year just as the crop ripened, the weather turned extremely hot and humid for several days.

The farm's eight-and-a-half acres of strawberries produced 10,000 baskets of fruit in a matter of days.

"We had no way to store or market that quantity of fruit," said Gene Countryman.

They managed to store some strawberries but much of the crop had to be dumped. Meanwhile, Gene had been making Raspberry wine for the family's own use for four or five years. In that process, he was using a carboy - a large glass bottle where "fines" in the liquid settle out in a process that also allowed the wine to clarify and age.

He stored the carboy in the Countryman Gardens store. Customers purchasing fruit and vegetables saw the carboy and asked what it was for. Gene explained its purpose but then started to consider would customers buy his strawberry wine.

"We hit on the idea of taking a valuable crop, the strawberries, and extending its shelf life by turning it into wine," said Eli Countryman.

But developing a winery was no easy task. For a winery to be established in Ontario, the operator must obtain a licence. Among the requirements is to have a minimum of five-and-one-half acres of fruit and a retail store. As Countryman learned more about the regulations, he realized he already had "about 60 per cent" of what was required through his market garden operation.

They received more assistance from Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario which regulates commercial wine making operations and Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food

publications about the industry.

A former potato storage shed was turned into the actual winery while additional facilities were added to an existing building with the intention of eventually being able to store 40,000 litres of wine.



Gene Countryman holds a bottle of his signature wine, Strawberry Delight, at Countryman's Estate Winery while at right his son Eli, holds Augusta Mystique, another signature wine that is a blend of five different wines.

Those visiting the Countryman's Estate Winery store will find bottles of various vintages displayed on shelves in a rustic setting. The country-styled décor features historical artifacts on the walls and lighting fixtures created from antique milk cart wheels. The store's "try before you buy" motto, allows customers to sample a particular wine before they make a purchase. Countryman's also does custom bottle labeling if wine is being purchased for an anniversary, birthday, retirement or some other special event.

Countryman's Estate Winery is located on County Road 26 (third concession) northeast of Maitland and is approximately a 10 minute drive from Brockville or Prescott. Those travelling on Highway 401 can take the Maitland/Merrickville exit (County Road 15) then go north to the flashing light at County Road 26 and turn right (east) for about three kilometres to the winery on the south side of

the road with a municipal address of 3387 and is marked with a large sign. The most distinguishing feature of the winery is the large display of antique farm machinery located in the front yard of the winery store.

For those with Global Positioning Satellite location devices, the winery is at 44 deg 41' 15.56" N and 75 deg 37' 06.55" W or those who need further assistance or information about the winery can call 613-348-1575. Countryman's Estate Winery also has its own website at www.countrymans.ca where there is a description of their wines, recipes, availability of on-line ordering and printable directions to the winery.

The winery store is open from Monday to Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and on Sundays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The store is closed on Christmas Day, New Year's Day, Good Friday and Easter Monday.

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