

Dennis Reynolds – Somerset Ridge Winery

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Let's go to the Jefferson Cup Invitational. This event is sometimes called the Olympics of wine competitions, where the "best of the best" are selected from wineries in all of America's wine-making regions. The results are in: Winning the top selection in its category is a wine from Somerset, Kansas. How did a winemaker in small town Kansas become a nationally known winery? It's today's Kansas Profile.

Dennis and Cindy Reynolds are the owners of Somerset Ridge Winery in Somerset, an unincorporated community in Miami County, Kansas. Dennis and Cindy grew up in the Kansas City area and met each other at KU. Dennis became a trial lawyer and Cindy a business executive, but they developed a passion for wine and grape growing.

Dennis's parents retired to a place in the country in Miami County. The property sat on a limestone ridge. Having traveled to grape growing regions in Europe and America, Dennis thought that this setting might be ideal for grapes. He and Cindy had grown weary of the constant travel and the corporate life, so they decided to get back to their roots, so to speak.

Dennis is also a history buff. "I learned that this had been a large wine-making region before Prohibition," Dennis said. "In 1901, more than seven thousand acres of grapes had been grown here. We're the same latitude as northern California."

Dennis and Cindy decided to give grapes a try. They began planting the vineyard in 1998 and established the winery in 2001. It was the first winery to be established in Miami County since 1881. Dennis and Cindy bought property adjacent to his parents and expanded operations in 2005.

Dennis and Cindy named the winery Somerset Ridge, after the large limestone ridge located on the property. "The limestone adds character to the grapes," Dennis said. "In Europe, certain varieties are planted near rock beds for the mineral and for good drainage."

Today, Somerset Ridge has thirteen different varieties and more than 8,000 grapevines. The winery produces more than 5,000 cases annually, including the award-winning dry whites and reds, semi-sweet whites and reds, and dessert wines. The tasting room at the Somerset Ridge Winery is open Wednesday through Sunday. The winery also has an outlet at a store in Overland Park. In addition, Dennis and Cindy are active in the local food movement.

Many of the winery's customers come from the Kansas City area which is only a twenty-five minute drive away, but the winery has also had visitors from as far away as Japan, China, Germany, France, Denmark, the Netherlands and more. Not only has Somerset Ridge become a destination winery, it has helped lead a remarkable renaissance of wine-making in the region. There are now several vineyards and five licensed wineries in Miami County.

Dennis and Cindy helped create the Somerset Wine Trail, a twenty mile route which connects the wineries in the region. Dennis served as vice president of the Kansas Grape Growers and Winemakers Association and was Chair of the state Grape and Wine

Council from 2008 to 2010. “We were able to get legislation through which helped the industry to grow,” Dennis said.

This is an impressive record for a winemaker in rural Kansas. The winery is located near the unincorporated town of Somerset with a population of perhaps one hundred people. Now, that’s rural.

“We’re in the business of making people happy,” Dennis said. “It is very fulfilling to grow something in Kansas and see it through to the very end. It is truly value-added.”

For more information, go to www.somersetridge.com

It’s time to leave the Jefferson Cup International, where a wine from Somerset Ridge in Kansas has won the award for best in its category. We salute Dennis and Cindy Reynolds and all those associated with Somerset Ridge Vineyard and Winery for making a difference with pioneering grape growing and artisanal wines. Their cup overflows.

And there’s more. Not only has this initiative stimulated other wineries, it has helped grow other businesses as well – including new life for a historic general store and Grange Hall. We’ll learn about that next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.