

Stephen Graue – Middle Creek Winery

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

“Which building do you want to buy? This one or that one?” And the answer is: “Both of them.” That is a major commitment. It demonstrates the entrepreneurial spirit of a wine-making family which is investing in the historic buildings of their region. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Last week we learned about the Somerset Ridge Winery in Miami County, Kansas. Today we'll learn of another winery and its related business.

Stephen and Kristin Graue are owners of Middle Creek Winery and the New Lancaster General Store in Miami County. Stephen grew up in southeast Kansas, where his initial efforts at beverage-making were not a resounding success. “As a kid, I made root beer and sold it to my friends,” Stephen said with a smile. “It was awful.”

He also remembers his grandmother's place which had grapes growing near her house.

Stephen served in the Army. After his service, he became a registered land surveyor and then worked in human resources. In 1996, he and his wife Kristin, a K-State graduate in accounting, bought land south of Louisburg. The property which they bought had an old fenceline with grapevines growing on it, like his grandmother's place.

Stephen and Kristin decided to explore the possibility of growing grapes commercially. They toured the grape growing region of Missouri and gained assistance from the Kansas Grape Growers and Winemaking Association. A K-State Extension specialist recommended a source for vines.

They bought six commercial vines, and the grapes did so well that they decided to pursue it. They expanded the vineyard.

“There was a market for grapes,” Stephen said. “But my wife the accountant saw that we could add value by winemaking.” They converted the old horse barn to a winemaking facility. In 2010, they opened the Middle Creek Winery. Today, the business has more than 2,000 vines in the vineyard.

Their goal is to produce artisan, handcrafted wines from Kansas grapes, honey and fruits. Free winetastings are available on Saturdays and Sundays at the winery.

This area has become a key wine region for the state. Middle Creek Winery is part of the Somerset Wine Trail and has hosted visitors from as far away as New Zealand, Germany, and Scotland. “We're the new Napa,” Stephen said.

One day while driving through the nearby community of New Lancaster, Stephen noticed a couple of old, closed buildings for sale. One had been a Grange Hall and the other a general store, and both were in disrepair. He thought one of them could be a winery outlet.

Stephen reported to Kristin about the two old historic buildings. He asked her which one she wanted to buy, and she answered him: “Both of them.” They took the plunge and decided to invest in both. They got them listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Grange Hall had served as a meeting hall for the Grange and for the Kansas Anti Horse Thief Association (never heard of that one). The Graues are repairing it now.

The general store was first built in 1874 and then rebuilt after a fire in 1903. The Graues made repairs and repainted the interior and exterior. It was reopened as the New Lancaster General Store and Winery on October 18, 2014, the first day of the annual Miami County Farm Tour.

The store once again serves as a gathering place for the community. It features Middle Creek wines, other Kansas products and the work of Kansas artists.

“We have a lot of fun with the people,” Stephen said. New Lancaster itself is a rural, unincorporated community. How many people live there? “In the town proper, about 20 people,” Stephen said. Now, that’s rural.

For more information, go to www.middlecreekwinery.com or www.newlancastergeneralstore.com.

Stephen and Kristin Graue had a decision to make. They chose to purchase both historic buildings, which was a major commitment. We commend Stephen and Kristin Graue for making a difference by investing in these historic buildings. They are not only growing grapes, they are growing the community.

And there’s more. Yet another business has developed to provide transportation on the wine trail. We’ll learn about that next week.

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