
FEATURED LANDOWNER: TONGUE RIVER WINERY

Bob Thaden started making wine as a hobby while in college in 1968 and hasn't stopped since.

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Each year, Bob and Marilyn Thaden and their son Josh work in their 3-acre vineyard located just south of Miles City. Understanding their growing conditions, good relationships with neighbors, and innovative management have contributed to the success of the vineyard and their winery. With the help of many, mid-September brings the harvest of as many as 10,000 pounds of Brianna, Marquette, Frontenac, Frontenac Blanc, Swenson Red, Frontenac Gris, and Petite Pearl grapes and the Tongue River Winery continues to flourish.

Bob Thaden started making wine as a hobby in college in 1968 and continued all through his 30-year career as a Christian minister. He and Marilyn, who is a speech pathologist, utilized every sort of wild or surplus fruit they could find or grow in search of exciting new wine creations. When family circumstances arose in 2004, they decided to relocate from Butte back to their place along the Tongue River just outside of Miles City. The land was arable and, reportedly, hardy grape varieties could grow there. The home would be a loving place to care for their elderly mothers, while allowing them to follow their dream of having their own vineyard.

Bob used years of knowledge about gardening and a healthy appetite for researching everything from the climate, soil fertility, and grapes to get started. His advice to others starting a big project like a vineyard, or even a small backyard garden, is to study the environment. Know the soil type and pH; the quantity, quality, and pH of the water supply; the average season length in days; the average lowest temperature; the average first and last hard frost dates; and the growing degree days (i.e., a measure of the average summer heat for the area). While growing grapes in eastern Montana is not standard, Bob suggests prospective gardeners visit with local growers to find out what cultivars work for them. By utilizing common, proven varieties that fit the climate, even gardening novices have a good chance of making things grow.

By 2008, Bob's vineyard was producing more grapes than could legally be converted to wine by amateur winemakers. Their wines were a hit with friends and family so it was a natural transition to turn the hobby into a commercial operation. Josh joined Bob and Marilyn in 2010 and the Tongue River Winery was officially in business.

While their careers in ministry and speech pathology helped with social interaction and planning skills, their business sense came primarily from their life experiences. Bob's advice for aspiring entrepreneurs: have an exit plan. "You need to know how to get out of a business smelling like a rose before you invest more than a few bucks."

When the Thadens built their winery, they constructed it as a 4-bedroom home. They left out some partition walls to form the tasting room on the main floor and plumbed in showers, leaving the drains and showerheads stubbed off. The entire building was designed to meet state codes for both a winery





and a home. They knew that if something happened to the business, with a couple thousand dollars and less than a month's work, they could transition the building to a nicely finished single family home which could be easily sold.

For now, the exit plan isn't necessary. Business is booming. Annually, the Tongue River Winery sells around 1,400 gallons of red, white, sweet, dry, grape, and fruit wine, with about half being sold directly from the comfortable, on-site tasting room.

One reason for their success is their commitment to local produce. "We are interested in producing regional wines that represent what is truly unique about this region," said Bob. "If it can't grow here, we won't make it. Our desire is not to compete with California or other western states in making European wines, but to create quality wines which have their own style, flavor, and bouquet made from fruit which lives comfortably, with care, in the frigid winters and hot summers of southeastern Montana."

The Thadens' creativity and willingness to be innovators in Montana's winemaking industry are also fundamental to their success. "Many of our sales are successful because we have something people have never tried before," says Bob. They produced the first commercial Haskap wine in the entire U.S. Haskap is edible honeysuckle also known as honeyberries. The taste is a cross between strawberries, cranberries, blueberries, and raspberries. Carmine Jewel cherries are used to make Tongue River's gold medal winning Cherry Pie wine. Both fruits were developed at the University of Saskatchewan and are hardy to -50°F.

To have enough produce to fulfill their orders and keep their winery stocked, the Thadens have gone outside of the box. In addition to grapes, they grow apples, cherries, plums, pears and other fruits. To extend their growing season, they installed high tunnels which help them gain about a month in both the spring and the fall and make it easier to ripen crops like

tomatoes, peppers, melons, and primocane raspberries. In 2014, they picked 200 pounds of yellow raspberries for their gold-medal winning white raspberry dessert wine.

Self-described foragers, the Thadens are good neighbors. They give and people give back. Throughout the year, community members drop by to share their bounty of crab apples, sand cherries, rhubarb, plums, and other fruits. "When you plant a row of wild plums in your shelter belt and you've got bushels of plums that even overwhelm the birds, what do you do with the rest?" asks Bob. "People hate to see fruit go to waste, so around here, they call the winery."

The family owned and operated business has no set hours. Along with their cell phone numbers, the sign on the door reads, 'Yes, DO call.' "We're not playing solitaire at the winery waiting for customers when we can be at work on the property, in town picking fruit, or delivering wine to retail partners across Montana," says Bob. Cordial and welcoming, the Thadens are quickly responsive and frequently open up the tasting room for visitors who soon become friends.

As natural collaborators, the Thadens teach wine-making and vineyard management classes and participate in listservs with regional fruit growers and wine-makers. They share information freely. "If we help each other make better wine in our area, we all benefit, as tourists discover that the Mountain West states and the Dakotas make some pretty good, award-winning wines."

It is this spirit and passion that brings people to the vineyard for harvest each fall, and year-round to share wines created with Montana produce and ingenuity.

For more information on the Tongue River Winery, visit www.tongueriverwinery.com. For more information on testing soil and water or about high tunnels, please contact your local MSU Extension office. ■