

Wine lovers turn passion into a business

Hinsdale couple's Napa winery has attracted local and national attention in its first year

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While some people drink wine as a cocktail or to accentuate a meal, there's a certain type of person in this world who's appreciation for the glass goes above and beyond whether it's red, white or rosé.

Wine lovers like Matt and Maria Kluchenek find the process of taking grapes off the vine and turning them into a full-bodied, well-colored beverage that intoxicates the senses to be an art. For this Hinsdale couple, wine-making is a way of discovering different cultures and now, with the release of their own winery's inaugural varietals, a way of sharing a part of themselves with the world.

On a 2004 trip to Napa the Klucheneks began talking with viticulture and oenology experts, and in 2007 they opened Mind's Eye Winery in St. Helena, a wine town in the heart of the valley.

"I kind of wanted to do something meaningful," Matt said. "Travel is great but I wanted to do something deeper and something we enjoyed. You find an opportunity and follow your passion."

At the start of the 2007 growing year, Matt and Maria picked out the highest quality grapes from local Napa vineyards. After harvest in the fall, they brought them to a custom crush facility. The Klucheneks personally love big, bold red wines, so Malbec, Merlot and Cabernet grapes were chosen for their first go at wine making. The juice spent two years fermenting in new French oak barrels at the winery until it was bottled this past July.

Feedback for the Cabernet

Sauvignon and Proprietary Red have been stellar.

"It's kind of like when you've cooked a wonderful meal and you want to share it with friends, and to have your friends and others tell you they love it is a wonderful feeling," Maria said.

The Klucheneks produced a conservative 300 cases in their first production. Coming out in the middle of a recession, Matt said he initially thought, "What have we gotten ourselves into?" But the response and sales demands have been steady.

Maureen Malone, co-manager of the wine list at Vie in Western Springs, said she found the wine to be amazing and was impressed with how good it was considering this is a first release.

"This wine is brilliant," she said. "It's definitely a sophisticated first effort. It's a classic Napa Valley Cabernet. The fruits in it are really ripe. It has a very complex structure."

Along with being found in restaurants in Los Angeles and downtown Chicago, Mind's Eye wines can be found locally in Hinsdale Wine Shop, Il Poggiolo, Butterfield Country Club, Cuvee Cellars and Wine and Vine in Elmhurst, The Grotto in Oak Brook and other locations.

Chefs at Ditka's in Oak Brook liked the wine so much, they're thinking of developing new menu options to compliment it.

"Fall is coming, so they were looking at adding new specials," Matt said.

With Matt practicing law full time and both he and Maria taking care of their young daughter Caterina, the Klucheneks have been taking



Hinsdale residents Matt and Maria Kluchenek know a thing or two about tannins, finish, palates, body and complexities. The two love wine and established their own Napa Valley winery — Mind's Eye — in 2007. Their Cabernet Sauvignon and Proprietary Red are now available locally. (Jim Slonoff photo)

things one day at a time since adding "winery owners" to their resume. The couple also has become marketing experts, producing labels, tasting cards and sales pitches.

"It's something you spend a lot of time and energy on," Matt said. "But it's easy to spend the time on something you're passionate about."

Maria's love of cooking has added a new level to their business. Those who visit their Web site, www.mindseyewinery.com, will find a section titled "Cucina" featuring a handful of Maria's own recipes that compliment the

wine.

Titled "I Dolci della Vita," meaning "The Sweets of Life" in Italian, Maria shares directions for making delicious desserts. Both cooking and wine-making are rewarding experiences for Maria.

"I find it to be a lot of fun," she said. "It's all about creativity and finding what it is you love and sharing it with others."

Pairing big, bold reds with chocolate treats is mouth watering, and Matt and Maria are excited to add a Syrah to their collection in their 2011 distribution.

"Each year we're hoping to

ratchet it up," Matt said. "Wine is really about exploration. It's an open canvas that people can explore for themselves."

While the couple plans to continue to live in Hinsdale, they do hope to get out to Napa Valley more than the three times a year they currently make the trip.

Their passion began on a trip they took through the wine regions of Italy as newlyweds and has become a commercial endeavor they're proud to share with their community and the world.

"We discovered something we really liked," Matt said. "And we wanted to share it."

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