

Creating an Industry From Vine to Wine

When you think of growing grapes and wine, images of Napa Valley, California and Lucille Ball's stomping abilities come to mind. The idea of growing grapes in a state like Wyoming seems laughable, if it weren't true. Patrick Zimmerer, 26, of Huntley, WY is proving such an idea isn't laughable. Zimmerer established Table Mountain Vineyards in 2001. The business has now become a full scale vineyard and winery in Wyoming, producing hand crafted wines from 100% Wyoming grapes and fruit products. While growing grapes in any climate is a large investment financially and in time, Zimmerer has faced many obstacles in developing an entire industry in Wyoming. It is his commitment to Wyoming agriculture and local economic development that has made him worthy of Wyoming's SBA Entrepreneur of the Year award.



Zimmerer convinced his family to let him establish a vineyard plot on their family farm. In May 2001, he planted 300 grapevines covering one-half acre. His initial plan was to see if grapes could survive Wyoming's climates and as a way for farmers to have a profitable alternative crop for a farming operation. Zimmerer realized a niche marketing opportunity for Wyoming grown grapes and initially planned to sell his grapes to an existing Wyoming winery. In 2001, Zimmerer applied for a grant from the Wyoming Business Council for Value Added Crop and received

grant funds to expand his vineyard operation and purchase processing equipment for Wyoming produced grapes. In 2002, Zimmerer planted 2,000 additional vines (two acres of vineyards). While Zimmerer's vineyard grew, so did his knowledge about grape varieties, pruning and winter survival rates. Zimmerer continued to educate the local community about the opportunities in grape growing at various extension workshops and horticultural/agricultural meetings. By 2003, Wyoming was home to nearly 10 additional vineyards and growers. Since 2003, the industry has taken root. His vineyard currently has expanded to nearly 8,000 vines and Wyoming now has almost 30 growers contributing 20 acres of Wyoming vineyards.



In 2004, the Wyoming winery that was planning on purchasing Zimmerer's grapes closed. With many grapes ready to produce their first crop, Zimmerer turned his vineyard business into a full-scale vineyard and winery. The winery was established in 2004 and had no where to go but up. While attending law school at the University of Wyoming, Zimmerer learned of a business plan competition for students. The winner of the competition was provided \$10,000 to assist in business startup and development. Zimmerer took his business plan and sought additional marketing advice from an SBA counselor in Laramie, Wyoming.

“The SBA was able to help me get my marketing plan on the right track. It was great to get an outside voice to point out the strengths and weaknesses of my marketing plan.” Zimmerer explained.

Zimmerer was able to use the suggestions from the SBA to help develop a stronger marketing plan for his operation. The SBA assistance was worthwhile; Zimmerer won the competition with



his business plan beating 15 other business plans in the competition. Using the money from the competition, he established his winery on his family’s farm. While many renovations had to be made, Zimmerer’s business approach was to utilize any asset he could until the vineyard and winery’s success could be proven. Even after a year of operation, Zimmerer keeps a realistic focus on his business. “When I need new equipment, I purchase it. I don’t jump the gun. If the business is growing and outgrowing equipment, that’s a good sign.” Zimmerer explained. The early profits in the winery

have been invested towards the winery and larger equipment.

Upon establishment of the winery, he found marketing obstacles. In Wyoming, an in-state winery can sell from its production facility or to the State Liquor Commission. Once sold, the Commission takes an automatic 18% markup and no control over product placement and distribution. Zimmerer stuck to his principles and creating a product that benefited the producer and not the middle-man. Zimmerer introduced legislation in 2005 to allow his winery the ability to sell and distribute his own products. The bill is still being developed due to a recent U.S. Supreme Court decision about wineries. The bill is aimed to go into effect in March 2006. Until that time, the wines have been sold exclusively through the winery in rural Huntley, WY.

In 2003, Zimmerer harvested grapes from his first vines. The vineyard produced nearly 100 lbs. of grapes in its first year of production. The same vines in 2005 yielded nearly 900 lbs. for a substantial harvest and in 2004 the winery produced 500 gallons of wine. In 2005, the winery increased its capacity from 2,500 gallons after processing 5 and one-half tons of Wyoming grown grapes, raspberries, apples and honey. Zimmerer handles his product from “vine to wine” which makes his venture nearly completely vertically integrated. His goals haven’t changed, while the winery can import grapes and juice from other states, the winery remains committed to using 100% Wyoming grown products and creating a market for alternative agricultural products.

The Wyoming District Office of the U.S. Small Business Administration named Patrick Zimmerer Wyoming’s Young Entrepreneur of the Year 2006. This award was presented to him on May 10, 2006 at a luncheon held at the Cottonwood Country Club in Torrington, Wyoming.

You can visit Mr. Zimmerer’s web page at www.wyomingproducts.net/Table-Mountain-Vineyards.html or for more information contact him at 5933 Rd. 48, Box 24, Huntley, WY 82218 or phone (307) 788-1707 or email at zimliv@wyomail.com.