

Bear Bones Winery embraces 'rustic elegance,' local fruit, passion for music

Husband and wife head into retirement with winemaking, entertainment, retail and viticulture venture



Bear Bones Winery is located in a former supper club at 2673 27th St. in Mikana. Submitted Photo

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MIKANA – Jim Goodpaster and Sherry Timmermann-Goodpaster said as their respective careers wind down, they're helping Northwest Wisconsin get winned up.

Goodpaster and Timmermann-Goodpaster officially opened Bear Bones Winery in April, offering the region 15 different wines – which are also available as slushies – primarily produced from local fruit and grapes, along with a small plate menu and weekly entertainment.

Located at 2673 27th St. in Mikana, the married couple said the building was a long-vacant supper club that was restored by Goodpaster, with enough room to house his passion not only for winemaking – but also for music.

At Bear Bones, Goodpaster said he makes and bottles the wine in the back and performs music every Thursday in the tasting room.

The establishment, he said, also has a “tastefully edgy” gift shop, as well as a guitar and music equipment store where he teaches lessons and services instruments.

As of now, Goodpaster said the location is the exclusive purveyor of their primary products – wines and one-liners.

“The only place you can buy my wine is in my store – and then you have to put up with me to get it,” he laughed. “I’m always funny. And if I’m not funny, just laugh anyway.”

The co-owners said their goal for Bear Bones is to provide not only exceptional and unique wine, food and retail, but also create an atmosphere of unpretentious “rustic elegance.”

Though they said Goodpaster’s sense of humor is a feature at the winery, the effort they put into the venture is serious.

“We’re both type-A people – very driven, high energy,” he said. “Tackling a winery, it’s a lot of work – a lot of research. The old adage – ‘if you want to make a million dollars in the wine industry, start with two (million)’ – probably is true. We didn’t go into it because we wanted to get rich. We got into it more because we liked the social aspect of it – the creativity aspect of it.”



The atmosphere of Bear Bones Winery, Co-owners Jim Goodpaster and Sherry Timmermann-Goodpaster said, is unpretentious rustic elegance. Submitted Photo

Timmermann-Goodpaster said part of the reason they opened Bear Bones is “we didn’t want to be bored moving into retirement.”

“So this is a great little gig,” she said.

Bear necessities

Timmermann-Goodpaster said the name of the winery is in part a nod to Northwest Wisconsin – a region likelier known as bear country than wine country.

She said it also regards the stripped-down winery itself – though the sense of minimalism wasn’t altogether planned.

The pair said they had invested heavily into building a wine-tasting room on the farm where they continue to maintain their vineyard and orchard, about 25 miles away.

It was only after completing the tasting room’s construction, Goodpaster said, that the township denied their application for a liquor license.

The town, they said – though dry since Prohibition – had indicated it would approve the winery, yet ultimately changed its mind late in the process.

"So we moved to this building," Goodpaster said. "It's one of those things where you drive by it all the time – we lived in the neighborhood, (Timmermann-Goodpaster) actually worked there briefly many many years ago – and we just said, 'well, let's take a look.' We walked in and it was really perfect for us. So, we purchased it and the Town (of Mikana) was very welcoming."

Timmermann-Goodpaster said they spent quite a bit of money at the other site, building up the tasting room.

"So 'Bear Bones' is kind of a play on 'bare' – we had to take the building basically the way it was," she said.

The other inspiration for the name, Goodpaster said, represents the way "I embrace my wines and my life."

"I don't like a lot of frills, and I don't like to do a lot of things to our wines," he said. "Our wines embrace the fruits that we grow."

Goodpaster said he has been making wine as a hobby for most of his adult life.

He said he grows the vast majority of the grapes, apples and other fruits used in Bear Bones wines.

When he wants or needs to add to his supply, Goodpaster said he sources grapes from other Wisconsin – and occasionally Minnesota – growers.

He said Bear Bones' most popular red wine is its Frontenac Noir.

Goodpaster said the Frontenac grape was successfully crossbred at the University of Minnesota to withstand temperatures as low as -35 degrees Fahrenheit.

"(The Frontenac grape) is not usually known to be that palatable, but I have a knack for making it pretty fruit-forward and pretty mild," he said. "The fact that everyone that comes in has really liked my wine, (and been) really complimentary – that makes me happy. That makes it worthwhile."

The co-owners said despite the initial permit challenge, they're ultimately grateful for the winery's location – so much so that they have featured photos of local scenery on the wine bottle labels.

They said the Red Cedar Lake area attracts many tourists and vacationers who have enjoyed the winery, particularly with its proximity to the lake.

"People come to the public dock a block away, park their pontoon, walk up to our winery and get a glass of wine or a slushy and head back out," Goodpaster said. "If you want to have a good conversation, (and be) laid back, it's a different environment when people walk into the winery. And they just walk on in from the resorts – we can see somebody new every week."

Timmermann-Goodpaster said Bear Bones welcomes people coming into town or leaving.

"Or maybe somebody drives by and says, 'hey, there's a little winery – let's go check it out' – and they buy a few bottles as they go for gifts or later consumption," she said. "So, it works out."

The visitors from neighboring states, Goodpaster said, also provide him the opportunity for plenty of good-natured banter.

"I think the biggest problem I have lately is when people come in, they don't tell you if they're from Minnesota until you have already over-poured the glass," Goodpaster laughed, "because Minnesota should only get a half pour."

Notes of light-heartedness

Timmermann-Goodpaster and Goodpaster said as fun as it is to engage with vacationers, they focus as much, if not more, on serving fellow locals.

"This is Red Cedar's winery," Goodpaster said. "Let's embrace it. Let's give them ownership."

They said Bear Bones is about an hour away from another winery – and music store.

The couple said the winery's easygoing, welcoming approach applies to customers with a full range of winery experience.

"We've had the spectrum – we've had the connoisseurs and we've had the newbies," Timmermann-Goodpaster said. "We try to make it fun and playful because sometimes people come in and say, 'I'm not sure how to sip this or drink this.' We try to really encourage people to just have fun with wine and experiment, and not be so worried about some of the stuff you might have read about wine being pretentious."

Goodpaster said Bear Bones Winery is "unusual for this area."

"If (customers) are a little intimidated I just tell them, 'hey, there are no rules.' You don't have to swirl the glass. You don't have to sniff it. Just taste it. Some you like, some you don't – everybody's palates are different.' A lot of guys come in and say, 'I don't like wine' – and they leave with a couple bottles in their hands and say, 'you know what? This is really good. I'm coming back.'"

Timmermann-Goodpaster said "converting those people who think they don't like wine" has been a fun part of the job.

Goodpaster said part of catering to those less familiar with wine and viticulture began the production of the oft-ordered cabernet – despite needing to break personal precedent and import the necessary grapes from California.



In addition to wine, Jim Goodpaster said Bear Bones has a guitar and music equipment store where he teaches lessons and services instruments. Submitted Photo

"I thought it would also be beneficial to have a comparison for our Minnesota-Wisconsin wines right next to the California wines – to show how good they are," he said. "I call it The Tourist – because it's from out of the area."

The co-owners said Bear Bones further pleases its patrons by offering local craft beers and chocolates in addition to Timmermann-Goodpaster's food menu – which she said she plans to expand after she retires in the next year.

Other future and potential plans, they said, include offering cider and dessert wine, selling apples from their orchard, starting a wine club and planning more events.

Increasing wine production for wholesale, Goodpaster said, is not necessarily one of his goals. Above all, he and Timmermann-Goodpaster said, they're grateful for the opportunity to enter this phase of their lives and careers, and with Bear Bones would like to maintain a workload the two can comfortably balance.

With Goodpaster making wine and handling the music, Timmermann-Goodpaster said she manages the paperwork, food and gift shop – with both of them running the tasting room.

"We have a nice, glorified hobby and enjoyable winery, and I don't want to spoil it," Goodpaster said. "But at the same time, I don't want to be a slave to it either – so there's a fine line."

Having worked hard their whole lives, the co-owners said they're happy to keep Bear Bones the kind of light-hearted affair they can share with their customers.

"We're not thinking we're going to get wealthy on this," Goodpaster said. "We just want to have a nice life, and we have the energy to do this. Ideally, I play guitar, I make a little wine, people come in, we have a conversation and we enjoy it. Kind of low-stress. If it becomes a job, maybe I revisit it – 'do I want that?' For now, it's supposed to be a boutique, nice lifestyle – and that's what it was all about."

Visit bearboneswinery.com for more information.

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