

SEVEN GENERATIONS ON SENECA

Fulkerson Winery Celebrates Its 25th Anniversary

BY OLIVIA M. HALL • PHOTOS BY JAN REGAN



Clockwise from top left: Original Fulkerson Winery building; Harvesting in 1977; Sayre and his parents, 1977; Sayre Fulkerson's parents, Roger and Katherine, 1977

SAYRE FULKERSON'S FIRST WINERY WAS IN his apartment during college. Scouring the Cornell vineyards for leftover grapes, he and his roommate would ferment big batches of whatever varieties they found, right on the clusters. "The wine turned out drinkable, but it wouldn't win any awards," Sayre admits. "We've come a long way since then."

Indeed, since those early experiments four decades ago, the self-taught winemaker has turned his passion for wine into a thriving family business, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

Fulkerson Winery's tasting room in Dundee, on Seneca Lake, attracts more than 37,000 annual visitors, who come for a lineup of wines that run the gamut from Old World-style dry Rieslings—"French wines are really what I try to follow," Sayre says—to Red Zeppelin, a popular and decidedly American blend of Catawba

and Rougeon.

"Fulkerson does a great job with diversity," says Ryan Baldick, cellar master of the New York Wine and Culinary Center (NY-WCC) in Canandaigua. "They're not afraid of any varietal: If they can grow it they're going to make it into a wine."

In the same spirit, Sayre and his wife Nancy, along with their son Steven and a dozen employees, run a multifaceted business that includes selling grape juice and supplies to home winemakers, custom crushing and sometimes fermenting grapes for other wineries, selling excess wine to vintners for blending, renting out the original farm house to vacationers, giving vineyard tours on foot or in a horse-drawn cart and growing increasing varieties of U-Pick fruits and vegetables.

The Fulkerson family is now in its seventh generation on this land, where in 1805 Caleb Fulkerson staked his claim with a





Steven and Sayre Fulkerson





willow walking stick. But the farm, which primarily grew black raspberries from World War I until berry diseases swept through the state in the 1960s, only began to focus on grapes in the mid-1970s. Sayre expanded the space allotted to vines to sell juice to a list of 800—now 4,500—customers that he had taken over from Glenora Winery, and a decade later, in 1989, to make wine commercially. Today, 120 of the family's 350 acres are dedicated to 23 varieties of grapes.

The vines sit on a range of soils, from sand to deep gravel and, below Route 14 and closer to the lake, heavy clay, which is tilled for better drainage and to allow the plants to grow deeper and unlock nutrients from below. "Good wines come from good grapes, so we really strive for the best quality that we can start with," says Steven, who followed in his father's footsteps and studied plant

sciences at Cornell.

Other practices to ensure healthy and happy vines include minimal tillage to reduce soil erosion, low-spray methods of integrated pest management and very low fertilizer input to feed the vines. "We try not to have to add sugar, so we like to get our fruit nice and ripe," Sayre says. "We don't want to do a lot of manipulation of the wine." His son agrees with this approach: "Instead of creating the wine we want, we take the fruit that we have and balance what it gives us that year." The result is some 30 to 35 different labels with a total annual output of up to 20,000 cases, compared to 1,000 in their first year of production.

About half of the sales come from sweet wines, a key part of the business. "People here in the northeast like sweet wines, so we make several of those," Sayre explains. "In our Juicy Sweet line,



such as the Matinee or Moscato, instead of adding sugar, we stop fermentation at a lower alcohol level, so it's half-fermented grape juice. It's a much lighter, more natural flavor."

His personal taste, however, runs more toward drier wines. "One day I went to pull some wine out of the cellar for a meal, and I was kind of embarrassed because my Riesling was a little too sweet for food," he recounts. "So I started making my whites drier." Among them are Grüner Veltliner, Sauvignon Blanc and half a dozen Rieslings, most of which are dry—or "bone dry," according to Sayre.

NYWCC's Ryan Baldick tends towards the William Vigne line of Rieslings, named after a Fulkerson ancestor who was one of the earliest Walloon settlers of Manhattan. "The Dry Riesling is a great representation of what the Finger Lakes can do," he

says. "It's off-dry and full of fruit, from apple and pear to apricot and a hint of bruléed pineapple." The judges of the San Diego International Wine Competition also took note of that wine's Juicy Sweet sibling, favoring it over numerous Washington state and German Rieslings for a platinum award in 2013. Most recently, it won the 2014 New World International Wine Competition's Best New World Riesling and Best New World White awards. The red side of the Fulkerson wine list, on the other hand, offers such varieties as Dornfelder, Pinot Noir, Burntray, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. For this year's anniversary, Zweigelt will also make its debut.

Fulkerson's juice customers buy these same varieties—supplemented by 10 additional types from other farms—as more than 30,000 gallons of unfiltered, raw grape juice every year.



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Melissa Ponticello, for example, has been making the one-hour drive from Hornell several times each season for the past few years to pick up Riesling, Baco Noir, Merlot and other freshly pressed juices for her home winemaking projects. "It's enjoyable because you get the whole experience of being able to see what other people are doing and ask questions," she says. "The staff down there is really knowledgeable and helpful. It's pretty nice that it's a small enough winery that they want to help you be successful."

She also picks up supplies in the store that Steven keeps stocked year-round with everything from fruit presses to bottles, yeast and oak chips, as well as a growing selection of home brew-

ing equipment. On Saturdays in the fall, he teaches beginners how to use these tools.

"My home winemakers are typically different from your average home winemaker who uses a kit (which contains juice concentrates)," he says. "You cannot keep grapes fresh, so we really stress the seasonality of it. But my philosophy of home winemaking is, 'I don't care what you're fermenting, just ferment something, whether it's berries, grapes, rice, grain.' And the nice thing about teaching people how to make wine is that I get to taste a lot of different things, from raspberry vodka to onion wine, which was, well, interesting."

In the end, the Fulkersons hope that home winemakers get to enjoy the same satisfaction that the family derives from its work. "It's the culmination of all that effort," Sayre says. "We have our own nursery, so we go from propagating those vines to planting them to enjoying the product with food. The whole thing coming together is the heart and the passion of it."

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