

Value-added Agricultural Success Story

Grinder's Switch Winery

This story is one of a special series of value-added agricultural enterprise successes in Tennessee. The entrepreneurs featured have worked with specialists at the Center for Profitable Agriculture in different ways to achieve various levels of start-up, sustainable and long-term enterprise success. I hope their stories will be interesting, informative and inspiring.

Rob Holland, Director, Center for Profitable Agriculture



Photo courtesy of John Harville

Joey and Gail Chessor are the owners of Grinder's Switch Winery near Centerville, Tennessee.

Grinder's Switch Winery, located in Hickman County near Centerville, is owned and operated by Joey and Gail Chessor. The vineyard and winery got its start as a hobby vineyard when Joey began growing grape vines on their property in the 1970s.

It took him a few years to master the production process, and by then he was making wine as a hobby. The hobby grew, and by 1998 he expanded his experimental vineyard, testing different varieties and production techniques.

At first, the Chessors considered cultivating only a vineyard and selling the fruit to other wineries. But once they were growing good grapes and making wine they actually liked, the idea for a full-fledged winery became a goal. Joey says, "It took a few years to determine which varieties to grow, plus it takes three years before vines are producing and another year or so before the wine is ready to drink." During this waiting period, the Chessors traveled the eastern United States and visited many wineries. They joined small winery groups on the Internet and devoted time to researching winemaking and grape production.



Grinder's Switch Winery features a tasting room, porch, gazebo, picnic tables, rocking chairs and a new walking trail.

When their wines began winning medals at amateur competitions, the Chessors seriously began planning their own winery. "The hardest decision was whether to plant a large, commercial vineyard. We knew when we made that decision, there would be no turning back," explains Joey. They analyzed the costs, including as many variables as they could imagine. Deciding there was a high enough percentage of probable success, the couple proceeded with their idea.

In 2003, Joey and Gail planted a four-acre commercial vineyard in red wine grapes (hybrid and *vinifera*). They focused on growing what other local vineyards did not produce and purchased additional varieties as needed. In 2007, *Grinder's Switch Winery* opened (a year earlier than planned), bottling 3,500 gallons of wine and selling more than half that in the first year.



Photo courtesy of John Harville

The Chessors say they have “had good luck working with good people.” Qualifying for a Tennessee Department of Agriculture *Agricultural Enhancement Program Cost-Share* grant helped with the processing barn and renovations to their home to create the tasting room. Other winery owners offered creative ideas and sold them quality used equipment at low prices.

Through membership in the Tennessee Farm Winegrowers Association and Tennessee Viticulture and Oenological Society (TVOS), they met David Lockwood, UT Extension’s tree fruit and nut specialist. “David has been a very good source of information regarding growing grapes,” says Joey. Their membership also provided them with answers to questions about regulations, bottling and production techniques.

The Center for Profitable Agriculture (CPA) also assisted. “Amanda Ziehl and Rob Holland conducted a market study of how much business we could expect the first year. We were a little worried about our location, but they determined we were in a good spot, so we felt good about the decision to go forward,” says Gail. Also, with the information from CPA, they were able to scale their purchases to fit customer demand.

The Chessors currently market their business through their Web site, brochures, wine festivals and an interstate billboard. *Grinder’s Switch Winery* is also partnering with nearby Keg Springs, Amber Falls and Arrington wineries to form the *Natchez Trace Wine Trail*. They hope this collaboration will result in more advertising at a lower cost and ultimately attract new customers to their business.

The Chessors believe they are growing into their business and target market. Future goals include expanding the amenities at their rustic setting, which now features a porch, gazebo, picnic tables, rocking chairs and a new walking trail. In 2008, a pavilion for weddings and family reunions will open, and on-site events such as music shows and a cooking class are also in the works, not to mention the unveiling of three new wines.

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The mission of the Center for Profitable Agriculture is to help farm families improve income by identifying new ways to add value to food and fiber products through processing, packaging and marketing. We focus on three areas:

- **Working with families and entrepreneurs to analyze value-added agricultural enterprises;**
- **Implementing market development studies to determine the viability of new products;**
- **Conducting educational programs for Tennessee farmers and agricultural leaders.**

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