



PHOTOS: LAURA PATON

WinterHawk Vineyards in West Kingston opened their doors to the public on Sunday to share with the community the time honored tradition of pressing grapes to craft the winery's estate wine from their annual harvest of Petite Pearl grapes. Above, Dan Hartnett helps process the grapes through a wine press. Below, Kurt Barbuscio sniffs the wine in its early stages of the process.

GRAPE EXPECTATIONS

At WinterHawk Vineyards' press day, patience is a virtue as local vineyard painstakingly harvests it next bottles of wine.

By Stephanie Bernaba
Special to the Independent

SOUTH KINGSTOWN — Rick Dyer had a strainer attached to a wooden pole in one hand, and a plan he wasn't sure would work.

On a rainy Sunday this past weekend, the owner of WinterHawk Vineyards in West Kingston stood over a tall tank of crushed Petite Pearl grapes that had been fermenting for about 12 days. In past years, he drained the liquid first and then climbed in to scoop out the heavy mass of skins and seeds by hand. This year, he tried the reverse.

"We're trying to get smarter," Dyer said.

Press day is the once-a-year event when the winery's estate grapes become young wine, and Dyer invites anyone curious enough over to watch. In good weather, the



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work happens upstairs, and the juice flows down into the winery by gravity. The lawn fills with visitors and golden retrievers, in honor of the Dyers' work with Yankee Golden Retriever Rescue. This year, the tail end of a Nor'easter kept the crowd small.

WinterHawk sits on about 4 1/2 acres on Yawgoo Pond Road. Dyer and his wife, Athena, married on the property in 2011, and he made all the wine for the wedding. Her Greek relatives gave the review that changed his life.

"This is good. You should do this," Dyer recalled them saying.

"Don't listen to Greeks," he laughed.

After decades as a home winemaker and years helping established wineries bottle their wine, Dyer went commercial about 14 years ago.

"The reason I went commercial was not because I was good at it," he said. "I had some wine that went bad, and I was able to correct it, then I said, 'Oh, maybe I am good at it.'"

He knew he had arrived, he said, at a seminar led by Daniel Pambianchi, author of the widely used guide "Techniques in Home Winemaking." When an attendee asked about vacuum bottling, Pambianchi turned to him.

"Well, Rick, you do vacuum bottling," Dyer recalled Pambianchi saying. "Why don't

you take this question?"

Wine is only one chapter of his story. Dyer has coached ski racing, founded an experimental aviation company and, for about 20 years, worked in technology for GTECH (now IGT), where he still does advanced development work. The winery, he joked, was meant to be retirement income. Asked when he retired, he laughed.

"I haven't," Dyer said. "Who would do that?"

That engineering mind shows up all over the winery. Many of the tools Dyer used on press day were his own designs, welded locally.

"Sometimes you have to improvise," he said.

In July, WinterHawk became the first Rhode Island winery recognized by BetterBev, a New England sustainability program for beverage makers administered by the Department of Environmental Management. Dyer said the vineyard needed 60 points to qualify, and it earned 166. The winery composts its grape waste, utilizes reusable equipment, and controls pests without chemicals, with help from a cat named Marina, who is famous on the winery's Instagram account.

From vine to press

Petite Pearl is a cold-hardy hybrid grape bred in Minnesota by Tom Plocher and released in 2009. Its tiny, blue-black berries grow in tight clusters and make deeply colored red wine.

Even hardy grapes have limits. A brutal winter killed 42 of Dyer's vines, which he plans to replant in the spring. They will take two to three years to produce, and, by his rule of thumb, each vine yields about 2 1/2 bottles of wine. Still, the harvest far outpaced the year before, when a late frost left the vineyard with only about five gallons of wine.

Timing the pick took some nerve. Rain fell just before harvest, so Dyer waited for the grapes to dry, then raced to pick them before the water soaking into the roots could reach the fruit and dilute it. Friends helped bring in the crop.

The grapes went through a crusher-destemmer, a machine that breaks the skins and pulls away the stems. That spared everyone the barefoot stomping Lucille Ball made famous. The crushed fruit, called must, then sat in a primary fermenter, a tank where yeast turns sugar into alcohol. Keeping the skins in the juice gives red wine its color, and Dyer lets it sit a couple of extra days for a deeper hue.

At harvest, the grapes measured 23 to 24 Brix, a scale winemakers use to gauge sugar content. Dyer expects the finished wine to land around 11 1/2 to 12 percent alcohol.

"It is wine at this point," he said as the aroma filled the space. "It's just got a little bit of a chewiness to it."

Scoop by scoop, the fruit went into the press, where

wooden blocks are stacked on a pressing plate, and a ratchet squeezes out the liquid. Dyer compared the stacking to a game of Jenga. What remains is a dense purple layer of skins and seeds that winemakers call the cake. Dyer uses part of it to filter the last of the juice before it goes to compost. A guest suggested turning the leftovers into grappa, a potent Italian spirit distilled from the skins and seeds left over from winemaking. Dyer passed.

"The only thing I've ever found grappa good for is running the tractor," he chuckled.

Asked whether he keeps the press to a particular speed, Dyer explained it's a process that requires patience.

"We will press no wine before it's time," he said.

The new wine went into a stainless steel "kegmenter," a beer keg modified for winemakers, where it will finish fermenting under an airlock. Dyer estimated this year's yield at 12 to 14 gallons.

Patience in the cellar

Every WinterHawk wine ages two years before bottling. The first year is spent in stainless steel "on the lees," resting on the spent yeast that settles at the bottom of the tank. Many winemakers rack their wine, siphoning it into a clean container to leave that sediment behind, but Dyer lets it sit. The second year is spent in oak barrels, which Dyer reuses in the European tradition. Everything the wine touches is steam cleaned at 250 degrees.

A California winemaker once summed up his approach, Dyer said, by asking, "So you're doing a 300-year-old process and using state-of-the-art equipment?"

Dyer also brings in juice under his license, including California Zinfandel and Chilean Sauvignon Blanc. Another California visitor once asked him how he could take her state's grapes and make better wine.

"Quite honestly, not all the winemakers out there put as much effort into winemaking," he told her.

Bottling day turns into a celebration once the wine is mature. To keep operations running smoothly, Dyer created a streamlined setup staffed by four people who handle filling, hand-corking, foiling, and labeling. WinterHawk usually sells out by the end of the year.

A gathering as old as wine

For neighbor Kurt Barbuscio, who lives diagonally across the road and comes whenever Dyer calls, the day is about more than wine.

"These are old traditions of coming together," Barbuscio said. "You bring everyone together, Rick, to do something that's been done for centuries. Millennia. It's amazing. That's what it's about. It's about people as well."

"I thought it was about the grapes," Dyer answered.

"It's about the grapes too," Barbuscio laughed.

Barbuscio worries about the spotted lanternfly, an invasive

insect that feeds on grapevines and has been spreading in Rhode Island.

"They get into anything with sugar," he said. "I'm very worried about this fly."

Roger Girard of Cumberland, a home winemaker who had stopped by a few days earlier to purchase empty bottles, returned to observe Dyer's pressing process. Girard started with a wine kit more than a decade ago, then taught himself from a book. He now grows about 30 vines of different varieties, many started from cuttings from a New Hampshire vineyard, and gives his wine away instead of selling it.

"I just came to see how he's doing it," Girard said. "When I pick my wine grapes in the backyard, they're red and white, so I mix them all together. Sometimes it comes out pink."

Afterward, the group moved upstairs to WinterHawk's new tasting room, finished in local pine, for charcuterie and a pour of Petite Pearl. Dyer coached his guests not to gulp it, but to allow the wine to reach the back of the tongue so the fruit and acid could "dance" into a long finish.

"I'm not a big fan of trying to make everything the same every year," Dyer said. "I'm a big fan of making it as good as it gets."

WinterHawk Vineyards is located at 35 Yawgoo Pond Road in West Kingston. For more information, visit winterhawkvineyards.com.