

A decorative illustration of a vine with leaves and clusters of grapes, rendered in a light brown or gold color, positioned vertically on the left side of the cover.

GROWTH

Potential

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
Peter Frank Edwards

*The story of how
a handful of
hobbyists turned
a corner of
southern Illinois
into a blossoming
wine country.*



BY ROLAND KLOSE



Guy Renzaglia wasn't the sort to slip into retirement and take things easy. An ebullient, energetic Italian, Renzaglia always had to be doing something — and what he liked doing most was being outside, working with his hands and growing things. He loved the raw beauty of southern Illinois, his adopted home, with its rolling terrain, verdant forests and limestone cliffs.

So, in 1981, Renzaglia and two partners — Ted Wichmann and Mark Cosgrove — bought land near the tiny town of Alto Pass, Ill., about 100 miles southeast of St. Louis, and planted 10 acres of grapes along Highway 127. The men all worked for an environmental center at Southern Illinois University in nearby Carbondale. Renzaglia, who'd already retired from another university job in 1978, was interim director.

Their plan back then was to supply the fresh-grape market, but when the vineyard

started producing in 1984, they ended up with 35 tons of grapes — much more than they could sell in the region. "There were certainly not enough jam producers in southern Illinois to buy it all," recalls Renzaglia's son, Paul.

The partners started trucking their fruit north, where Fred Koehler was building Lynfred Winery in the Chicago suburb of Roselle into an acclaimed regional brand. That worked for a few years until the Renzaglias (by this time, Paul had joined his father in the business) realized that they weren't getting a huge return on their effort. "We figured we were making about six cents an hour," Paul says.

To squeeze a bit more from the grapes, the partners decided to build their own winery. In this conservative corner of Illinois, where the most notable man-made landmark is the 111-foot illuminated cross on Bald Knob Mountain, it was a gamble.

Not only did the partners have to convince Alto Pass to allow alcohol sales, but odds were that they wouldn't recoup any of their investment and would look ridiculous in the process.

"We were scared to death," the younger Renzaglia says. "Even I thought it was a silly venture."

Wichmann remembers a pivotal town hall meeting for which he'd been tapped to serve as the designated speaker for the Alto Vineyards partners. During the meeting, he'd have to go toe to toe with several Baptist ministers who were opposed to the winery. He leaned on the Good Book to make Alto's case.

"I said, 'My understanding is that Jesus Christ's first miracle was turning water into wine,'" he remembers. "And this one young minister said, 'Yeah, but I have it on good authority that it was very low-alcohol wine,' and everybody broke out laughing. That was, like, the turning point."

Alto Vineyards got its license, and in 1988 the new company produced about 1,500 gallons of wine, made from a half-dozen varietals, mostly French-American hybrids such as chambourcin and vidal blanc that do well in the region. On opening day, the parking lot was packed and people lined up to buy the first bottles. The stock sold out in three days.

When Alto Vineyards opened, there were just six other wineries in all of Illinois — and no others in the state's southern region.

A year later, George Majka and Jane Payne opened Pomona Winery about 20 miles up the road. The two building contractors, looking for something different to carry them into retirement, decided to specialize in fruit wines made from regionally grown apples, peaches, blueberries, strawberries and black currants. Wichmann, who'd sold his interest in Alto, opened Owl Creek Vineyard in 1994 after leaving his university job.

The three small businesses — Alto, Pomona and Owl Creek — came together to start the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail, a modest but enjoyable pass where visitors to the region can knock off a few hours while soaking in the stunning scenery of the 270,000-acre Shawnee National Forest. Two more small wineries, Von Jakob Vineyard and Inheritance Valley Vineyards, would join them a few years later.

For several years, it was quaint, relaxed and intimate. And then the Munchie Man arrived.

Alto Vineyards



Pomona Winery awards



Paul Renzaglia, owner of Alto Vineyards



BARRETT ROCHMAN, a Chicagoan by birth, made money as an undergrad at Southern Illinois University (SIU) in the 1960s by selling hand-delivered birthday cakes (complete with song) to students at SIU and then expanded into sandwiches — hence, his Munchie Man nickname. His fortune, though, comes from real estate, including buying distressed properties in tax sales. Since 1972, he's owned property near Cobden, Ill., that son-in-law Jim Ewers was using to raise grapes.

When they decided to build a winery, Rochman wanted to do it in a big way. His motivation, he says, was to leave a legacy. "Some people build a pyramid," he says. "I built a winery."

Rochman, now 67, pumped more than \$3 million into producing a faux-17th-century Tuscan villa — replete with stucco made to look weather-beaten, a clay-tiled roof, stone arches, giant oak double doors and a 35-foot carved bar — and filled it with his art and antiques. There were two bed-and-breakfast suites, a large facility for weddings and other events, a lake, a water-fall and outdoor sculptures.

Rochman's Blue Sky Vineyard, which opened in the summer of 2005, dwarfed the other Shawnee Hills wineries, and it immediately became an 800-pound gorilla in a group of chimps. At first, Rochman didn't

Bottling machine at Alto Vineyards





Hedman Vineyard



Rustle Hill Winery



Brad Genung,
owner of
Owl Creek
Vineyard



Blue Sky Vineyard

know a thing about wine, something he freely admits, though he says he's evolving. ("My palate's getting better," he says.) Some were upset that Rochman started offering beer and mixed drinks at the winery. ("My idea of a winery is very different than what Blue Sky is," says one of the old-timers.) Some even suggested that Rochman had an edifice complex. ("His ego likes this building," says a friend.)

The grouching, however, was overshadowed by the fact that Rochman's investment was noticed — the publicity garnered by Blue Sky helped draw more visitors to the region. Suddenly, lots of people wanted a piece of the action.

Gerd and Anders Hedman, transplanted Swedes who owned a small vineyard and a small peach orchard in Alto Pass for many years, began bottling their own wine and serving Scandinavian-themed meals. Their cozy Peach Barn Café, which also does double duty as Hedman Vineyards' tasting room and gift shop, is the place for people who have a hankering for pickled herring, lingonberries and Swedish meatballs. Anders boasts that his vines grow on the highest elevation in the region, second only to Bald Knob Mountain.

Gary Orlandini, who moved to the region in 1966 from northern Illinois and

stayed to get away from cold winters and flat prairies, planted about four acres of chambourcin and vigneoles on his farm in 1988 and christened the facility Orlandini Vineyard. Two years ago, he built a large tasting room and joined the wine trail. A friendly, plainspoken bear of a man, Orlandini says it's been a happy decision. "Running a winery is an owner-friendly business," he says. "You get to make money, enjoy nice hours and meet nice people."

Other newcomers are refugees from big city and corporate life. The year Blue Sky opened, Scott Sensmeier, who left an information-technology job in Atlanta after 12 years, and his wife, Kate, bought a small winery near his hometown of Cobden, renamed it StarView Vineyards, built a new facility for visitors and increased the vineyard acreage.

That same year, Brad Genung, a former equity research manager for a St. Louis-based investment firm, bought Owl Creek from Wichmann, who never really liked the marketing side of the business. Genung says he developed an interest in the wine business in the mid-1990s, and the more he learned, the more he became convinced that Shawnee Hills was the place to be. "I studied the soil and climate and decided that at some point

Want a Dating Service That's as Savvy as You Are? Meet Your Match.

Dating specialist Sara Darling reveals the ins and outs of helping single professionals spice up their dating lives. She's one of the many expert consultants at It's Just Lunch — the personal dating service that's helped countless people around the globe make exciting connections.

What typically gets between singles and a rewarding dating life?

I'd say the top three challenges are making the time, knowing where to find like-minded people, and protecting your personal privacy. For most people, the problem is very rarely getting a date. The problem is actually connecting with someone interesting who you're attracted to, and who you can really have fun with.

I have a lot of clients who are very active in the community and in the business world who come to me specifically because they don't want to date within those same circles. It's too uncomfortable.

I also work with people who have recently moved or who have ended a long-term relationship and just don't know where to start looking. The bar scene isn't typically a viable option. And when it comes to online dating, there's not enough security or personal privacy. No one wants to be Googled or continuously emailed by people they have no interest in dating.

What's the best way to meet compatible people?

Making a connection through someone who really knows you and is looking out for you is the key to success. I think that's why It's Just Lunch has grown to be such a respected organization over the past 18 years. Our dating consultants handle everything in a very personalized and efficient manner ... from finding the right matches to making all the arrangements for a date. All our clients have to do is show up and focus on having fun with someone new.

Why do people trust you with their personal lives?

I think it comes down to discretion, standards, and personal service. When people call me to schedule an interview, it's usually because they've made a decision to make a proactive change in their personal lives. And our service is completely

confidential, so it makes taking that next step a lot easier. In fact, we never share last names or phone numbers with clients, even when we match people for a date.

Another major distinction is that we personally hand-select every match. We're not like dating services that believe an algorithm is a good way to match people. What we do is more of an art than a science.

What are the most common dating mistakes you see?

Number one is putting too much pressure on yourself. This happens a lot with people who don't have a lot of connections to other singles. They meet someone and think, "I've got to make this work out. It could be six months before I find someone else even remotely interesting." My clients know that I have plenty of great matches for them, so they can relax and not feel rushed.

The other mistake people make is repeatedly dating the same type of person and expecting different results. I always encourage my clients to open themselves up to connecting with people who have similar core values but different professions, backgrounds, and interests. And we have a very diverse clientele, so there's always a wide variety of interesting people to meet.

What's the biggest reason people use a dating service like yours?

It's definitely the time factor. Not in the sense that our clients don't have time to meet people. They do. It's just that the last thing they want to do is waste valuable personal time making a connection with someone who isn't exactly what he or she made themselves out to be. We take that frustration away and make it easy to meet people well worth spending time with.

**Meet your match today.
Visit ItsJustLunch.com
or call 1.800.335.8624.**



IT'S JUST LUNCH®

Alabama • Arizona • California • Colorado • Connecticut • Delaware • Florida • Georgia • Idaho • Illinois • Indiana • Iowa • Kansas • Kentucky • Louisiana • Maine • Maryland • Massachusetts • Michigan • Minnesota • Mississippi • Missouri • Nebraska • Nevada • New Jersey • New Mexico • New York • North Carolina • Ohio • Oklahoma • Oregon • Pennsylvania • Rhode Island • South Carolina • Tennessee • Texas • Utah • Virginia • Washington • Washington DC • Wisconsin • Canada • Ireland • Australia • Thailand • Singapore

this is all going to pop,” Genung says. Buying an established winery with Owl Creek’s reputation was, he says, a “no-brainer.”

And in early 2006, Jim and Barb Bush, retired phone company executives from Chicago, acquired Kite Hill Vineyards. They’d scouted the country from Hawaii to Kentucky looking for the ideal place to operate a bed-and-breakfast and, to their surprise, fell in love with southern Illinois. They made an offer and found out the adjoining winery and vineyard were for sale too. They were unprepared for the volume of business they immediately attracted — the first year, all of their wine sold out earlier than they had expected. “We know we have to expand,” Barb says.

Among the newest entrants into the local winery business are John Patrick and Debbie Russell, who opened Rustle Hill Winery on Highway 51, smack-dab in the middle of the wine trail area and closer than their competitors to Carbondale and its thousands of SIU undergrads. Though Rustle Hill produces and bottles more than 6,000 gallons of wine a year, it feels more like a wine-themed entertainment complex than a winery, packing people into its chalet-style main building that boasts a deck overlooking a lake, an amphitheater and a couple of luxury cabins that can be rented by the day. The atmosphere here on a typical Sunday summer afternoon is southern Illinois casual: college girls in tank tops and shorts, middle-aged couples in khakis and pastels and weekend bikers sporting sleeveless tees and do-rags. The chances of crossing paths here with a wine snob are slim to nonexistent.

Old-timers have greeted the arrival of well-heeled competitors and their entertainment-oriented facilities with mixed feelings — a tinge of envy, a sense of vindication and gratitude.

“The business was started by people into wine — old hippies, starry-

eyed folks,” says Majka, the current president of the wine trail association. “But I see it as a good sign that people interested in making money are interested in what I do.”

THE COLLISION of people who love wine and people who love money has caused its share of tension, but that’s true all over the Midwest, which has witnessed explosive growth in wineries. In a business where profit hinges on reputation, quality will inevitably get better, and Bob Foster, a professional wine judge in San Diego, says he’s witnessed an “amazing improvement” in Midwest wines.

“Some of the whites are just spectacular,” he says. “The reds, because of a shorter growing season but warmer temperatures, are much more challenging.” That said, Foster is impressed by some of the nortons and chambourcins produced in the region and has a couple of cases of those reds aging in his wine cellar. For the most part, though, the wines are unknown outside the region, he says — and that needs to change.

A retired California state prosecutor, Foster has served for the past three years as competition director for the Mid-American Wine Competition, an event held each year in Des Moines, Iowa, that has given wineries in a 16-state area an opportunity to showcase their best work. The competition draws more than 600 entries each year. In 2008, several Shawnee Hills wineries came back winners: Gold-medal recipients included Alto, for its 2003 chambourcin; Blue Sky, for a 2007 seyval; and StarView, for its 2005 norton. Owl Creek’s Bald Knob, a 2007 vintage chambourcin, was named the best red wine. (The southern Illinois wineries didn’t fare as well in 2009, earning no major prizes.)

Although the region has produced some widely acclaimed wines, there are embarrassments too. Some wines are flawed through production blunders; some are



If You Go

Alto Vineyards

8515 N. Duncan Rd.
Alto Pass, Ill.
(618) 893-4898
www.altovineyards.net

Blue Sky Vineyard

3150 S. Rocky Comfort Rd.
Makanda, Ill.
(618) 995-9463
www.blueskyvineyard.com

Hedman Vineyards

560 Chestnut St.
Alto Pass, Ill.
(618) 893-4923
www.peachbarn.com

Inheritance Valley Vineyards

5490 State Rt. 127 N.
Cobden, Ill.
(618) 893-6141
www.inheritancevalley.com

Kite Hill Vineyards

83 Kite Hill Rd.
Carbondale, Ill.
(618) 684-5072
www.kitehillvineyards.com

Orlandini Vineyard

410 Thorn Ln.
Makanda, Ill.
(618) 995-2307
www.orlandinivineyard.com

Owl Creek Vineyard

2655 Water Valley Rd.
Cobden, Ill.
(618) 893-2557
www.owlcreekvineyard.com

Pomona Winery

2865 Hickory Ridge Rd.
Pomona, Ill.
(618) 893-2623
www.pomonawinery.com

Rustle Hill Winery

8595 U.S. Highway 51 N.
Cobden, Ill.
(618) 893-2700
www.rustlehillwinery.com

StarView Vineyards

5100 Wing Hill Rd.
Cobden, Ill.
(618) 893-9463
www.starviewvineyards.com

Von Jakob Vineyard

1309 Sadler Rd.
Pomona, Ill.
(618) 893-4500
www.vonjakobvineyard.com

overly sweet schlock. As author of the region's successful application for an American Viticultural Area (AVA) designation — granted by the U.S. Department of the Treasury Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau in 2006 — Wichmann is encouraging the region's winemakers to raise their games by participating in blind tastings of each other's products and comparable wines from other regions and accepting constructive criticism.

That's easier said than done.

"The AVA meetings are like a soap opera," Wichmann says, smiling. "There are a lot of big egos. If you had to ask me, one of the common denominators among the people who open wineries is having a big ego — a strong ego, anyway. Getting those egos together is a real challenge."

Pomona's George Majka was trained as a clinical psychologist, and that background helps when he runs wine trail association meetings.

"It's kind of like a family," he says. "Families can be dysfunctional. We didn't exactly choose each other." At the same time, winery revenues on the Shawnee Trail have grown by 28 percent per year since the mid-1990s, Majka says, and that kind of growth "doesn't happen from people squabbling."

That's Rochman's attitude as well. "One winery doesn't make a trail," he says.

The Shawnee Hills wineries reflect the characters of their owners. Some are ambitious — Brad Genung, for example, says he wants to grow the Owl Creek brand more than tenfold (it's doing about 12,000 gallons per year now). Others — such as Orlandini, who does about 2,400 gallons — are content where they are.

"Every winery has its own personality," Orlandini says. "Mine is a lot like my dog here," he says, pointing to Vinnie, a Pomeranian-Jack Russell mix, sleeping under a table. "He's friendly."

Orlandini has two daughters, but neither plans to follow him into the business. "They have no intention of getting dirt under their fingernails," he says.

Others of the first-generation winemakers aren't sure what will follow, either.

"A lot of us started in middle age or in retirement, and a lot of us are wearing out," says Paul Renzaglia. "The young people aren't picking it up, and I worry that we'll see this industry turn into a bunch of people

with money [but] without the passion to do it themselves."

As for the man who started it all, Guy Renzaglia is showing the wear and tear of his 92 years and is no longer active in the business. But the old man, his son says, is still kicking — and still drinking his wine.

"Consuming wine," Paul says. "That's his only interest now." **AW**

For information about the wineries and other activities in the Shawnee Hills region, go to www.shawneewinetrail.com.

ROLAND KLOSE is the former editor of the *Illinois Times* and the former managing editor of the *Riverfront Times*. He is the business editor of the *Commercial Appeal* in Memphis, Tenn.

Heading to New York? Going to Broadway? The show starts here.



Enjoy a trip to Brazil
without leaving
New York.

The steakhouse even
vegetarians would love.



Theater District
316 West 49th Street
Bet. 8th & 9th Avenues
212.245.0505
plataformaonline.com

"Golden
Apple
Awards"
for Food
Safety and
Cleanliness.

Wine
Spectator's
"Best of Award of
Excellence"
Since 2001



TriBeCa
Riodizio Churrascaria
221 West Broadway
Bet. White & Franklin Streets
212.925.6969
ChurrascariaTribeca.com