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## Business Journal

Updated: Tuesday, June 30, 2009 10:44 AM CDT

# Long Creek Vineyards offers local flavor on a time-honored beverage

By TONY REID - Business Journal Writer

LONG CREEK - To make a grapevine love you, you've got to hurt it.

They've got this breed of tough love down to a [fine art](#) at Long Creek Vineyards in Long Creek, where viticulturist Jody Fisher says only the grapes of wrath await those who make wine vines too comfortable.

"If the vines don't believe they are under stress, they won't produce the grapes we need," said Fisher, 45. "When we first planted our vines, we had to physically twist them, make them think they were hurt. You've got to make them think they are going to die."

The desire to seed an uncertain future with offspring prompts the suffering vines to bring forth their gratuitous grape bounty, and skilled winemakers can go on fooling the vines season after season; some of the oldest grape vines in the world have known histories dating back 400 years.

Poor soil is another plus - and a tall order to find in Central Illinois,, which is covered in rich, black prairie. Happily for Long Creek Vineyards, the glacier that pressed most of this area as flat as an ironing board came to a screeching halt at their 25-acre site, leaving the well-drained vineyard hilly and salted with glacially-deposited rocks, boulders and gravel.

Ground like that is the kiss of death for corn and beans but is ideal for grapevines that expect the worst from life and like to go drilling for water with root systems that punch down 30 feet.

The proof of all of this environmental pudding is in the drinking, and no one can doubt that Long Creek ferments results. The vineyard's precise rows march over 4½ acres and produce 10 different kinds of wine that cover a broad palate: everything from Chambourcin - "black cherry and chocolate, with hints of smoked bacon" - to La Cin, "bold but fruity, hints of strawberry, but with a meaty backbone," according to their information guide.

The wines also have racked up a string of [medals](#) at the Illinois State Fair and, for winegrowers, the more prestigious Indy International Wine Competition organized by Purdue University, a major center of North American wine-growing knowledge.

Jody Fisher founded Long Creek Vineyardss in 2004 with his wife, Terri, and they run the business with

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Business Journal photos/Stephen Haas  
Terri and Jody Fisher enjoy the fruits of their labor among some of the arbors at Long Creek Vineyards.

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help from her brother, Brad Warnick, and his wife, Laura, plus Terri's parents, Jacki and Gary Warnick, who used to raise cattle on that brutally tough vineyard soil.

"Now if you had told me 20 years ago I would one day have my own vineyard, I would not have believed it; no way," said Terri Fisher, 46. "But Jody and I have enjoyed drinking wines for close to 20 years, and I guess it just kind of evolved."

What got the cork rolling, besides lots of cooperative [family](#) members, was moving into a circa-1886 house in Blue Mound in 1999 that had four grape vines in the backyard dating back to the days before Prohibition.

Vineyards

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"So, the first year we're there, we had 800 pounds of grapes, and they're not jelly grapes," explained Jody Fisher. "So, it was like, 'Well, we're wine-drinkers, and these are wine grapes, so we decided we're going to make wine.'"

Which they did, getting occasional help from their four daughters to do the treading in big buckets and [investing](#) in some amateur equipment that managed to produce a drinkable result.

"It was good," Fisher recalled. "It wasn't like California or French wines, but it was OK. And it was enough for us to know that, 'Wait a minute, we can do this.'"

They've since moved to a custom-built house and winery on the vineyard grounds, where their wine is aged in oak barrels downstairs. They've built sales and interest through hard work and their great-tasting products and run the winery like a full-time business, even though neither Fisher can be there all the time: He holds down a day job as a projects estimator for King-Lar, and she is trust operations officer in the [wealth management](#) division of Soy Capital Bank.

They plan to expand their acres under cultivation and one day build a tasting room overlooking a scenic pond at the foot of their vineyards, which will be a perfect location to host weddings and other kinds of happy events. It's all part of a carefully mapped-out path to the time when the couple can raise their glasses in salute to making the Long Creek Vineyards their full-time, all-the-time occupation. Like making great wine, however, building the business can't be hurried, especially in the midst of a recession.

"We have a lot of hopes and dreams, but it just takes time," said Terri Fisher. "Getting the market built up, getting the product built up, all the equipment, getting everything that is needed: It is just a lot of time and money."

But as a means for winning friends and influencing people, it's hard to top the effects of mankind's favorite social lubricant for the last 8,000 years. The vineyard has established various wine clubs that host regular meetings and activities and offer thirsty participants deals on wine, even the chance to adopt one of those long-suffering vines.

And Long Creek's marketing efforts couldn't come at a better time, despite the dregs of economic gloom and doom. With a rising tide of studies and reports toasting the health benefits of drinking wine in moderation, record numbers of Americans are flocking to take their medicine: "What's happened in the last 10 years is a 1,000 percent increase in U.S. wine consumption," Jody Fisher said.

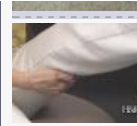
He said people also have discovered there is a wine out there for every occasion, and it's the perfect accompaniment to one of America's other favorite activities: eating.

"People who don't have a wine with their evening meal just don't know what they are missing," he added. "It wakes your taste buds up to where you can appreciate what food really tastes like."

The wines that bathe those taste buds have to be a feast in themselves, and getting the strange alchemy right is what makes winemaking such a fascinating business, according to his wife.

"Making a wine you are proud of is a mixture of art and chemistry," Terri Fisher says. "It's lots of work, but it's also a form of artistic expression."

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