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From a little stress, something great grows at Long Creek Vineyards

By TONY REID - H&R Staff Writer

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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 grapevines in the world have known histories dating back 400 years.

Poor soil is another plus, and a tall order to find in a Central Illinois covered in rich, black prairie. Happily for the 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 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 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 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 both 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 Vineyards in 2004 with his wife, Terri, and they run the business with help from her brother, Brad Warnick, and his wife, Laura, and Terri's parents, Jacki and Gary Warnick, who used to raise cattle on that brutally tough vineyard soil.



Jody Fisher tops off a barrel of wine at Long Creek Vineyards Tuesday, June 16, 2009, in Long Creek, Ill. (Herald & Review/ Stephen Haas)

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Terri and Jody Fisher pose for a portrait among some of the arbors at their business, Long Creek Vineyards, Tuesday, June 23, 2009, in Long Creek, Ill. (Herald & Review/ Stephen Haas)



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"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."

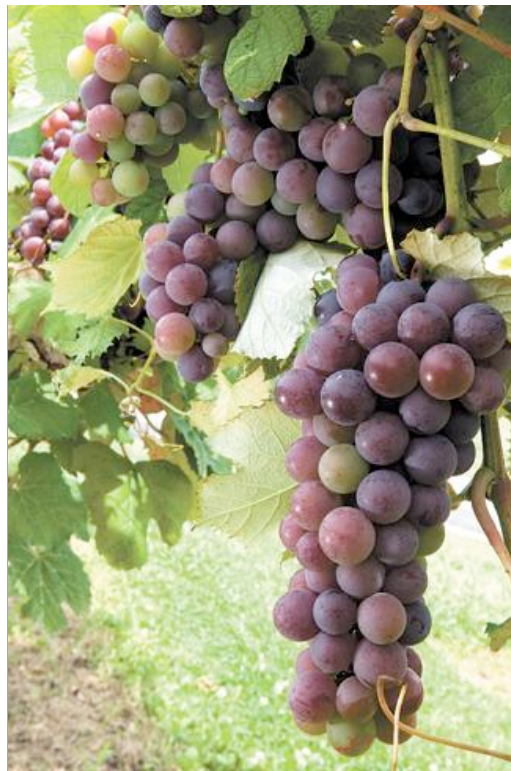
What got the cork rolling, besides lots of cooperative family members, was moving into a circa 1886 house in Blue Mound in 1999 that had four grapevines in the backyard dating back to the days before Prohibition.

"So the first year we're there we had 800 pounds of grapes and they're not jelly grapes," Jody Fisher said. "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. They 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.



Herald & Review/Kelly J. Huff
Long Creek grapes

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 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 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," Terri Fisher said. "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 and 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.

The number of wineries in Illinois has gone from 12 in 1997 to more than 70. The state ranks in the top 12 wine-producing states, with 450 vineyards and a direct economic impact of \$283 million annually.

Customers are seeking out local wines, said Jay Emrich, one of the owners of the Decanter, 215 N. Main St. in Decatur. The Decanter is one of the places that wines from

Long Creek Vineyards can be purchased.

"They want to take a bottle of wine back home," Emrich said of customers who come from out of town. "They pick out something from a local place. Others come in asking specifically for Illinois wine or from a specific winery like Long Creek."

Wineries such as Long Creek Vineyards help create an interest in the industry, and the area could benefit from a wine trail like in Southern Illinois, said Mike Delaney, another of the Decanter's owners.

Jody Fisher said people have also discovered that 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.

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

Staff Writer Chris Lusvardi contributed to this report.

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MORE INFO

The Long Creek Vineyards winery is open 4 to 8 p.m. Fridays, noon to 7 p.m. Saturdays and noon to 5 p.m. Sundays. Call 521-6297 or go to longcreekvineyards.com.

The wines also are sold at The Decanter in downtown Decatur and served at the Beach House restaurant and Sliderz in Decatur.

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