

Sweet Legacies

With just a tinge of green, a spring vegetable-based wine draws fans coming from a vintner who grew up on the farm. BY TAI ALEXANDER

From picking asparagus to packaging fresh-cut zucchini, many aspects of farming were ingrained in Kellie Fox growing up in Walkerville.

“My family has been farming in Oceana County for five generations,” noted the Shelby-based winemaker, who with her husband, Todd Fox, owns and operates The Fox Barn Market, Winery & Outdoor Cafe. “My parents, Michael and Lorraine Chase — along with my grandparents, Miles and Lena Chase — were frozen food processors (Chase Farms, Inc.) and fruit and vegetable farmers.”

Before them, Kellie’s great-grandparents had followed in their own parents’ tracks as dairy and grain farmers.

Todd’s family shares the same deep agricultural roots. Less than two miles from Lake Michigan’s Silver Lake Sand



Todd and Kellie Fox serve quality fruit wines (among other taste sensations) in their historic barn’s tasting room.

Dunes, in the footsteps of his own father Bruce and grandfather Roy, Todd now owns and operates the business his great-grandfather N.J. Fox founded in 1947 — N.J. Fox & Sons, Inc. — which harvests 500 acres of cherries, 500 acres of apples, 100 acres of pears, 100 acres of peaches and 75 asparagus acres each year.

The parents of 19-year-old Noah (who’s studying Agri-Business Management at MSU) and younger teenage daughter, Emelie, Todd and Kellie restored their 1920s-era barn and began selling local items and gifts along with fresh produce in 2005. Three years later they added their winery and tasting bar, which serves quality fruit wines including Harvest Peach and Harvest Tart along with Kellie’s why-not-experiment “Odd Fox” hit, Asparagus Wine. The

Fox Barn’s specialty is always released during Oceana County’s National Asparagus Festival (June 8 this year) and sells out by summer’s end.

Living in Oceana County, a nod to asparagus makes sense — but with wine? The idea was Todd’s. One day he came into the wine cellar with some asparagus and said, “Let’s try this.” I thought he was crazy and I really didn’t want to mess with it, but eventually, I did. To our surprise, it wasn’t bad. Our “Odd Fox Wine” is white, with just a tinge of green. There’s no mistake that it’s made with 100 percent asparagus upon your first sniff, and it definitely tastes like asparagus — with a hint of sweetness. It sounds odd but it’s fun and folks enjoy it. It goes great with a mild and creamy



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK BALEK

cheese and crackers.

Besides fruit and wine, what local and regional products do you offer? Our business started out with the intent of selling the produce raised on the family farm, but with the addition of the wines that product line has been overshadowed. We are still offering fresh fruits and vegetables from our farm, as well as honey, jams and syrup from our neighbors.

Spring must be a beautiful time at your farm. Spring is a rebirth of the land — blossoms bursting, fresh green shoots emerging and the first taste of that royal vegetable, asparagus. It also means the daunting task of cleaning the barn.

How does this 1920s-era barn play into the family business? We needed space to store our containers, so we used a corner of the barn. The following year, we cleaned a stall and invited customers into the barn to buy our produce. (Next came) a cooler...and by then we had taken over the entire front half. After Todd and I enjoyed a weekend touring wineries near Traverse City, we

hatched the idea to transform our barn farm market into a wine tasting bar, with a kitchen for appetizers and retail space.

What's it like at your Outdoor Café? It's a peaceful, beautiful place to, take in a view of the farm. While the cafe is in its third season, we are tweaking the menu (which features Fox Barn wines and hard cider, juices and sodas) each year to satisfy our guests. We have found that families and friends like to linger over a glass or bottle of wine with not only hors d'oeuvres, but sandwiches as well.

What does the area's agricultural heritage mean to you? We have evolved over the years and generations in order to remain sustainable. It's not always easy working with family, but at the end of the day I take great pride in the fact that I am in the same business and in the same county that my great-great-grandparents were. ≈

To learn more, visit foxbarnwinery.com. Tai Alexander is a West Michigan-based freelance writer.



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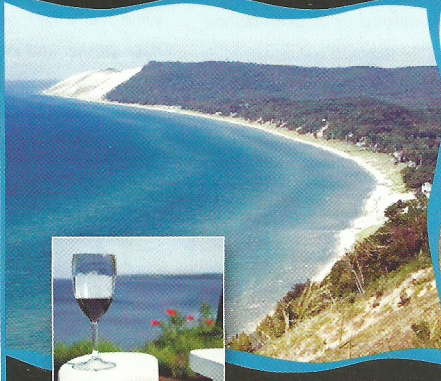

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