

Thorpe Vineyard: A Surprising Success

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WOLCOTT, N.Y. — Fumie Thorpe isn't your typical Upstate New York vintner in any way, yet she founded award-winning Thorpe Vineyard, "The Little Winery on the Great Lake." She's female, from Tokyo, and has a formal education in meteorology and astronomy, not winemaking.

"I never planned on doing this," she said. "Twenty years ago, the wine business was not that common. It was not very easy to be a winemaker away from major wine regions like the Finger Lakes. The business climate is different there."

In addition, 20 years ago, Thorpe was a newcomer to the U.S. and to viticulture. However, eagerly embracing both has proven to be essential to the winemaker's success.

"I've been winning a lot of things," she said, seemingly baffled at her own success.

Two years ago, her wines won 20 awards. Last year, she took home 10 medals at the National Women's Wine Competition, the Finger Lakes International Wine Competition in Rochester, N.Y. and other competitions.

Not bad for a woman farming three-and-a-half acres of French hybrid grapes by herself. She learned grape-growing and winemaking from the property's previous owner, Bob Straubing, who was an amateur winemaker, and Kemp Bloomer, another amateur winemaker.

But her viticulture education hasn't stopped there.

"It's a continual learning experience," Thorpe said. "I don't take courses in it, but I go to conferences. I go to classes at the (Cornell University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences New York State Agricultural) Experiment Station in Geneva."

Her knowledge of weather patterns has turned out as an asset to grape growing, too.

"They grow well near (Lake Ontario)," she said. "It has an insulating effect sometimes. It doesn't get as cold as the Finger Lakes."

Wolcott, N.Y. borders Lake Ontario in Wayne County, just north of the Finger Lakes wine country, where wineries draw an impressive tourist population every year.

Thorpe produces about a thousand cases per year among her dozen different varieties, which start at \$8.99 apiece. The newest label, Tooley's Traminette, celebrates the 20th anniversary two years ago of her business. Thorpe named the hybrid white wine to honor her late dog, Tooley, which she described as a dog with "a sweet look — with attitude." The beloved pooch is pictured on the label.

It's not just a quaint publicity stunt; Tooley's Traminette won a gold medal at the New York Wine and Food Classic in 2008, which has helped increase the variety's notoriety.

Tooley the dog is not the only Thorpe critter to have a wine named for him. Bunny Blush, a semi-sweet wine, honors Merrier, a pet rabbit that Thorpe owned.

Public perception of wine has helped boost the industry in general.

"Wine is getting to be a very popular beverage for regular people and not just for Christmas or a birthday," Thorpe said. "More people drink wine more casually. I think that helps me and other wineries. Wine health benefits are being emphasized."

She sells wine at her store at 8150 Chimney Heights Boulevard as well as online at www.thorpevineyard.com. Soon, she hopes to open another store at Orchardview Country Market, located at the busy intersection of Route 414 and Ridge Road.

As a satellite store, "Vineyard on the Ridge" should bring significantly more traffic in contact with her products than her original location, which is tucked away from any main road. Thorpe has been working on this project for a year because she must obtain a separate license to sell alcohol at that site. She has also been working on refurbishing an existing building on the site. Thorpe anticipates opening the new store in April and hiring a few employees to keep both operations functioning.

Thorpe also markets her products at several New York stores and venues, including two restaurants, Lorri's Secret Garden, in Palmyra and Pultneyville Grill, in Pultneyville.