

The 'Little Winery on the Big Lake' celebrates 30



HURON — Fumie Thorpe didn't come to America from her native Tokyo to become an award-winning winemaker.

It just worked out that way.

She is the owner of Thorpe Vineyard, a Wayne County winery off the beaten path on Chimney Heights Boulevard in Huron.

Thorpe is just a stone's throw from Chimney Bluffs State Park, which draws visitors from across the nation.

Many of those park visitors stumble across Thorpe Vineyard, the county's first, and for many years, its only winery.

And while the apple still reigns in Wayne, the grape has a place in the heart of New York's fruit belt, as other wineries — along with cideries and distilleries — have popped up over the past few years.

Thorpe Vineyards, part of the growing Lake Ontario Wine Trail, is celebrating its 30th year.

Thorpe said she had no intention of making wine for a living. Her love was weather, and she dreamed of working in meteorology.

Her native Japan didn't allow women to study meteorology, so she headed off to the United States to study at the State University of New York at Oswego to pursue her passion.

That's when her career path took a turn.

While still in college, she met and married an electrician Jock Thorpe.

When her father came from Japan to visit the couple in the summer of 1988, they happened upon Straubing Vineyard, a winery established in the late 1970s by Bob Straubing of Newark, who transformed it into a farm winery in 1984.

Straubing, however, wanted to retire and put the business up for sale.

Her father, said Fumie, liked the idea of buying the winery, and so did her husband, Jock.

She did not.

Thorpe lost that argument, and Thorpe Vineyard was born.

Three decades later, and now divorced, the slight woman from Japan is still running what she has coined "The Little Winery on the Big Lake."

She ran the business while continuing to pursue her studies at Oswego while her husband worked full time. In 1991, she received her meteorology degree with a minor in astronomy.

Thorpe got the meteorology degree she came to the U.S. for, but never pursued it as a career. The winery was her life.

Unlike college, her winemaking education was mostly on the job — anything from growing the grapes to the business end of the operation.

Luckily, she had some help in those early years. Straubing and his experienced winemaking friend Kemp Bloomer helped out.

Fumie also tapped into some of the Finger Lakes region's leading winemaking minds, such as icon Dr. Konstantin Frank, as well as other winemakers and grape growers. The scientists at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva have also provided her with assistance over the years.

Her keen mind and science background was a plus in a field where so many disciplines come together, including weather, chemistry and agriculture.

People talk about the microclimates of the Finger Lakes, but Fumie said Lake Ontario has one as well, noting that many years ago, grape growing was more prominent in Wayne County before apples became the leading fruit crop.

"Without great grapes, you can't make good wine," she said. "I think we (in Wayne County) can grow some great grapes," she said.

Thorpe doesn't think the winery's remote location in the East Bay area of Wayne County is a detriment.

“Syracuse and Rochester are only an hour a way,” she said.

Although Fumie said some customers discover Thorpe Vineyard while visiting Chimney Bluffs, many are there because of the recommendations of friends and family.

“Word of mouth is probably the biggest thing for our business,” she said.

Thorpe noted an uptick in business when she joined the Lake Ontario Wine Trail, which has signs at various points leading the way to her winery.

Thorpe Vineyard has 3.5 acres of grapes and produces about 1,000 cases of wine a year. She buys some of her grapes because of the vineyard’s small size.

As the sole proprietor since her 2008 divorce, Thorpe continues to oversee all operations.

“I do have helping hands, but I’m the one running this,” she said on a recent Friday when she took care of customers in the winery’s small but comfortable tasting room.

Her favorite thing is being outdoors and working in the vineyards.

“It’s hard work, but I do enjoy it,” she said.

As for her meteorological studies, Thorpe is still a weather buff, as she was tracking a moving storm system on her phone while talking about her business with the *Finger Lakes Times*.

She’s also a talented artist.

On the walls of her tasting room you’ll see the many watercolors she has painted over the years. Her paintings can also be seen on the labels of most of Thorpe Vineyard’s bottles.

She does most of her art in the winter when Thorpe is closed.

On the life she leads thousands of miles away from her bustling and congested hometown of Tokyo, Thorpe has no regrets.

“I like living in the country,” she said. “I don’t think I could go back to Tokyo.”