

Thorpe Vineyard in Wayne County was in the stars

Fumie Thorpe celebrates 20 years of award-winning winemaking

Karen Miltner • Staff writer • May 27, 2008

How does a sky-gazing native of Tokyo end up growing grapes and making wine in a remote corner of rural Wayne County? Fumie Thorpe insists that there was no premeditation involved. In fact, as she celebrates the 20th anniversary of Thorpe Vineyard, she seems quite comfortable with the label of accidental winemaker. "It's been a quarter-century since I left my hometown city of 11 million to take up a residence on the shore of this Great Lake. Five years later a haphazard (opportunity) brought a wine business in front of me," says the petite 47-year-old winemaker who produces about 700 cases of vinifera and French-American hybrid varieties annually at her wind-swept winery in Wolcott near Chimney Bluffs State Park. Thorpe came to New York in 1983 to study meteorology and astronomy at State University of New York at Oswego. Soon after, she met and married union electrician Jock Thorpe. During her studies, Fumie Thorpe's father came for a visit, with intentions of investing in some American real estate. After looking at countless properties, the Tokyo businessman was intrigued by a tiny commercial winery with an acre of vines owned by longtime amateur winemaker Bob Straubing. The barn housed a Japanese-made Kubota tractor. "My dad fell in love with that tractor. ... I still strongly believe that if it had been a John Deere or New Holland, he wouldn't have been that much interested in purchasing this winery," recalls Thorpe. The purchase was made, the visit ended and the Thorpes were thrust into a venture neither had bargained for. But Fumie Thorpe's keen scientific proclivities and deep-rooted sense of duty immediately kicked in and she put her studies on the back burner (eventually, she did finish her degree). With help from Straubing and fellow amateur winemaker Kemp Bloomer, Thorpe learned how to make wine and grow grapes.

Her steady determination and hard work has paid off, as Thorpe's wines have earned gold medals at the National Women's Wine Competition. She has also medaled in other competitions. "Fumie has done a good (job of) making wines of consistent quality," says Jim Trezise, president of the New York Wine & Grape Foundation. "To my knowledge, there are only about three or four other female owner/winemakers (in New York state), although many women are involved in the business, including as part of family ownership." Thorpe jokes about her minority status, both as a woman in the male-dominated field of winemaking, and as an Asian in mostly white Wayne County. "I'm easy to spot in a crowd around here," she says. The Thorpes have ended their marriage and Jock Thorpe is no longer involved with the winery. But Thorpe's 12-year-old dog remains a key player at the winery, and her anniversary wine, Tooley's Traminette, is named after the golden retriever. When asked if she is happy about the accident that befell her, Thorpe's indirect yet practical response offers a quiet sense of contentment.

"I like to live in the country," says Thorpe, whose home offers plenty of sun and clouds and rain and birds and stars to observe. "When you think about it, this isn't a bad way to make a living."

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