

Living 50 Plus

Huntsville-Madison

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COMPLIMENTARY



Suzanne Swift

The owner of Fleet Feet has had heartache and happiness all wrapped into 56 years, and in some ways, her life has only just begun

Cultivating a new hobby

Tips to cultivate a new hobby that can help pass the time in a rewarding and engaging way

La Famiglia

Couple continues family tradition, fulfilling their dream of opening a winery

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LA FAMIGLIA

Couple continues a family tradition,
fulfilling their dream of opening a winery

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PHOTOS BY JOSHUA BERRY





Amatevi tutti gli uni gli altri. Love one another.
L'amore vince. Love conquers all.

These phrases are prominently printed on two signs that adorn the property of the newly opened La Famiglia Vineyard and Winery. And love and family are what owners Tom Fitzgerald and his wife, Bev Massa, put into opening their lifelong dream.

Tucked just off Pulaski Pike on Rigsby Circle in Toney, the idyllic, small, family-owned vineyard and winery was born from family tradition. Both the Fitzgerald and Massa families came from Italy, bringing with them a strong work ethic for the coal mines and a deep knowledge of winemaking.

"They all had vineyards. In the summertime, they made wine," Tom said. "All the families got together and made wine as a tradition. They went from one vineyard to the next, altogether. They call it a vendemmia, a grape picking. We took that and brought it with us."

When Bev met Tom, he had a vineyard, and she recalls vividly the time when he voiced that "one day, I want to own a small winery."

"That was kind of always the goal. We always kept that goal inside. And then we were 'braced' here from

St. Louis, so we looked for land where we could have a few vines," Bev said. "And we planted some in front of our house on Kelly Springs Road. Tom tried planting different things to see what worked."

As retirement neared, the couple decided to begin seriously exploring their dream of opening a winery. They came across 11 acres on Rigsby Circle that was perfect for their dream. They planted their first vines six years ago.

Although the land purchase was what set reality into motion, the actual preparation for the dream began 20 years ago, when Tom started experimenting with what grapes would grow well in North Alabama. During this time, he discovered a discoloring of the *Vitis vinifera* grape vines. He took a photo and sent it to Auburn University, where it was determined the vines were being attacked by Pierce's Disease, a malady that can wipe out an entire vineyard and ruin the soil. It was time to experiment further to find grapes that were both disease-resistant and suitable for making wine.

Tom reached out to the Southern Grape Growers organization for results from the group's experimentation with different grape varieties.





“They have found varieties that are good at winemaking and that no one else plants, but that do well here,” Tom said. “So, I experimented with them and found that they did great as well. Verdellet is a good example. It is a French hybrid that is mainly used in the Northeast, but the winters there are too cold, making it phase out there. But for some reason, no one in the South ever plants them. So, I brought them back.”

Tom did not stop there. He conducted more research and discovered grape experimenter, Robert Zehnder. Zehnder, born in Sheffield, Alabama, is known for hybridizing wine grapes. He developed the Zehnder vine, which is a female vine.

“This is strictly a female vine, and Zehnder had to plant it next to a line that bloomed very late. Most of the high-quality wine grapes bloom early, so nobody wanted to mess with growing them,” Tom said. “I found a Norton one that blooms very late, and so I cured it with that, and I got good crops that were disease-resistant and very good for winemaking. We are the only winery that we know of that uses this grape for wine.”

The fact that an Alabamian developed the grape appealed to the couple. From the grapes to





the other fruits used in the wine, to the fermentation, bottling, and packaging, every wine at La Famiglia is locally produced.

“When people drink our wines, they are drinking Alabama. What they are partaking in when they come here is truly local,” Tom said. “The grapes are grown out here or come from the 600 vines at our home. We are a small farm winery, and people are drinking and purchasing local.”

Even though Tom has mastered the La Famiglia process of harvesting, fermenting and bottling their wines, he continues to research and experiment to find unique tastes. The couple has found the winery community, both locally and nationally, helpful.

“When we were looking into the Viard Blanc, we found by speaking with others who grow it, that it has to be picked at a different time, so you have to do some adjusting and also use a certain type of yeast. That was a learning curve,” Bev said. “And then we met a gentleman while on a winery tour in Virginia who helped Tom with the Crimson Cab by giving him some advice. And locally, Wills Creek Winery has been great mentors for us. We don’t consider ourselves competition. We consider ourselves more as family.”

Family. That one word just stands out when talking

with Tom and Bev. Besides all the research and experimentation, Tom has conducted to make their winery successful, family is probably the most key ingredient. Their daughter, Fran, who lives and works in Houston, contributes to the writing and marketing, and their son, Patrick, who lives and works in Washington, D.C., helps with harvesting and a plethora of other tasks.

Bev says the naming of the 20 wines in their portfolio, as well as the descriptions for those wines, were all written by family members.

“We were visiting my sister in Illinois, and we were drinking the matriarch of our portfolio, Black Velvet. She came up with the name, thinking of the horse,” Bev said. “She told us to add some sparkles on the back of the label, and so that’s how the label came about.”

And then there is the Crimson Cabernet.

“I immediately said this one has to be connected to Alabama football,” Tom said.

The description, again written by family, describes this wine as “a fan favorite that will surely be a go-to for any celebration or SEC Saturday.”

And then there are family heirlooms that have found their way into the business. Hanging on the wall of the winery building is an old crusher that belonged to Bev’s uncle, Ed. He not only made wine but also grew Con-





cord grapes for Welch's.

"Every year, we pull out the crusher for ceremonial purposes. It's rusty, so we can't use the juice. We let everyone get in there to do the Lucy and Ethel thing," Bev said. "It's to pay honor, and to remember the family members that bestow this gift on us, and that bug for winemaking."

The winery is currently open on Saturdays and Sundays from noon -6 p.m. On Saturdays, guests can enjoy food trucks and live music. Sundays are more laid back.

"We encourage the community to come, chill, bring your charcuterie, your lunch, whatever you like. We are family and dog friendly as well," Bev said. "The community so far has been beautiful—beyond what we anticipated."

The vineyard will be closed from January through early March for vineyard maintenance, including pruning vines.

"When mid-April and May come around, it's so amazing to see," Bev said. "It goes from barren, and then you start seeing some of the buds. And the next thing you know, it's covered."

Although opening the winery has always been a dream, Tom, a retired government contractor, and

Bev, a retired Madison County Schools teacher, see retirement as the best time to start this venture.

"Farming is a risk. If you have a hailstorm at the wrong time, it will hit the grapes, break up the skins, and they will rot," Tom said. "And at this stage in life, you are so much more creative doing your own thing. It's wide open. It's a lot more manageable when you retire and you have some money coming in. It's a lot more stable, safer."

Bev, who still remembers Tom's exclamation of owning a winery one day, says he was all smiles when the winery opened in June.

"When we opened, Tom was just so happy. And to me, I just gave thanks. It's all in His glory that we get to do things in His name," Bev said. "We've had some friends say, 'You are the only people we know who had a dream that really made it happen.' That's just a joy."

And as for the signs that grace the property of La Famiglia Winery and Vineyard.

"Let's all love another. Everything here is based on love and not hate," Tom said.

Bev chimes in.

"Love it. That's what family is. Yes, that's what family is."