

# *Romancing* THE VINE

## Where tradition and a new Minnesota era of winemaking meet, there's Morgan Creek Vineyards

By E. M. Morrison

Photo by Rolf Hagberg and Kay Mithaugen

*Cambria, Minn.* — Over a century ago, August Schell established one of Minnesota's first vineyards on a hillside overlooking the Cottonwood River. The founder of August Schell Brewing Company planted 50 rows of grapevines from the Rhine Valley of Germany and equipped his New Ulm home's cellar with built-in fermenting vats.

Now one of August Schell's great-great grandsons has revived the family winemaking tradition.

Georg Marti and his wife Paula have established Morgan Creek Vineyards in the picturesque Minnesota River Valley south of New Ulm. The five-year-old vineyard bore its first commercial grape harvest this season, and the Martis began fermenting in their 1,600-square-foot farm winery. Next May, the couple will present the first Morgan Creek vintage.

### **Vintage amour**

The Martis' winery faces east, overlooking a narrow valley. Below the winery patio, a meadow falls away to Morgan Creek, a swift-running tributary of the Minnesota River. At dusk, a white scarf of mist gathers along the valley floor, floating above the water like the river's breath.

Across Morgan Creek the glossy crowns of oaks, elms and sand-bar willows resound with the chirrup of birds, the cry of a red-tailed hawk. To the north, climbing the sun-struck slope of a steep hill, rows of vines twine in graceful contours, clusters of purple grapes ripening against the green leaves.

Sound romantic?

It is, say Georg and Paula. In fact, it's the reason they grow grapes, the reason wineries attract visitors: "It's all centered on the romance of the vineyard."

### **In love with the land**

The area around Morgan Creek was first settled by Welsh farmers, who used the land mainly for grazing livestock. The dry, sandy-soiled hillsides are covered with riparia — wild, hardy, native grapes.

Back in 1992, the Martis were looking for firewood when they came across an ad for ten acres of idle pastureland along Morgan Creek near Cambria. They went to see the property, fell in love with it, and made an offer that very day.



*Georg and Paula Marti snuggle into a fermentation vat at their Morgan Creek winery near New Ulm. In May, the Martis will present the first vintage of their five-year-old vineyard.*

A friend who had lived in Europe, where vineyards often cover the south-facing hills of river valleys, suggested growing grapes.

## **Grapes in Minnesota?**

Many people are surprised to learn that grapes even grow in Minnesota. But the state has more than 100 acres of commercial vineyards, according to estimates by the Minnesota Grape Growers Association.

Southern Minnesota has a good climate for grapes — at least during the growing season, says Peter Hemstad, who manages the University of Minnesota grape-breeding program. “But we do have trouble keeping traditional wine grape varieties alive in the winter.” Early growers, like Marti’s forefather Schell, buried the vines in trenches to protect them from winter freeze.

Taking up where Schell left off, the Martis planted 500 vines in 1993. They put in half a dozen Old World varieties, including Marechal Foch, Pinot Gris, Riesling, Gewurtztraminer and Aris, plus two promising cold-hardy cultivars developed in Minnesota — Frontenac and St. Pepin. In 1994, they added another 500 vines.

## **Family strengthens the tie**

The entire Marti family works the vineyard. Georg, Paula and their four children built hundreds of feet of trellises; they cultivate, weed, prune and harvest by hand. Every fall, they pull the tender German and French vines off the trellises and bury them.

Grape growing requires plenty of day-to-day management and technical know-how. “We had to learn both grape growing and grape growing on our particular site,” says Paula, who worked for many years in the floral industry.

At the same time, they battle local wildlife bent on eating the fruit of their labor. With help from the Department of Natural Resources, the Martis put up an electric fence to ward off raccoons and deer. They scare off plundering robins with computerized broadcasts of distressed bird cries. And an Airedale named Puck chases away the pocket gophers and chipmunks.

All in all, “it’s hard work, physically demanding work, but it can be very pleasant,” says Georg, who likes autumn in the vineyard best. Paula, who prefers the lush mid-summer, adds: “You feel so relaxed in the vineyard. It’s contemplative work — a real balance to public life.”

## **Underground vintners**

Last month, the Martis harvested about four tons of grapes from their one-acre vineyard. The grapes are processed in their winery just a few hundred yards away.

The winery is built into the hillside, which keeps the temperature about 51 degrees year-round. Sunlight pours through the big front windows of the winery, flooding the sales and tasting room. Visitors can look through double French doors into the production room and cellar.

Morgan Creek, the state’s fourth-largest grape winery, will make 500 gallons of German and French-style wine this year, about \$20,000 in retail value. Eventually, the Martis plan to produce 2,200 gallons a year from their grapes.

The \$250,000 winery has the capacity to process grapes from other Minnesota growers also, says Lisa Gjersvik, manager of AURI’s Waseca office. AURI, which provided an equipment loan, has been working for years to build Minnesota’s fledgling grape industry, she says.

“Having a place to process grapes is very important in attracting new growers and developing the industry.”

The Martis bring outstanding marketing and public relations experience to their new venture, Gjersvik says. Paula, 48, is director of communications for the Catholic Diocese of New Ulm and editor of the diocesan newspaper.

Georg, 49, spent much of his career at August Schell Brewing. In the late 1970s, he and his brother successfully positioned the company in the specialty beer market. Georg developed a regional marketing campaign around the heritage of Schell’s Brewery. He strengthened the brewery’s link to tourism by creating a popular winter festival, offering visitor tours and beer tastings, opening a museum, and starting a performing arts series in the historic Schell’s garden, formerly the family vineyard.

### **Build a winery and they will come**

Morgan Creek Vineyards will employ a similar strategy, building on the region’s thriving tourism, Georg says. The winery, near a scenic highway less than two hours from the Twin Cities, Rochester and St. Cloud, will be open on weekends from May to December. The Martis have planned a variety of special events, wine tastings and promotions aimed at tourists.

Similar strategies have worked in other parts of the country, says Hemstad. “Wine and tourists go very well together. And tourism is a huge industry in Minnesota.”

Lake City grape grower John Marshall, secretary of the Minnesota Grape Growers Association, agrees: “Tourism is a natural outgrowth of the wine industry. You’ll see that all over the world. People go to the Rhine, not to see the river, but to see the vineyards and wineries.”

At the moment, Minnesota’s grape and wine industry is so small that nobody keeps official statistics on it. But the Martis foresee a time — decades hence, perhaps — when grapes are an important crop in Minnesota and wineries a major value-added industry.

For now, though, “We feel like pioneers,” Georg says, “and that’s exciting.

*To receive a Morgan Creek Vineyards brochure and calendar of events, write to Georg and Paula Marti, Morgan Creek Vineyards, Route 2 Box 214A, New Ulm, MN 56073. Or e-mail them at [martimcv@aol.com](mailto:martimcv@aol.com).*

Courtesy of [AURI.org](http://AURI.org)

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