



(Above photo courtesy of Justin Hartsell.)

Winery and Vineyard Challenges in Rural SWVA

By: Justin Hartsell

Abingdon, Va. — The challenges of operating a vineyard and winery in rural Southwest Virginia includes knowing what grapes grow best in the region, adhering to Virginia laws, knowing the surrounding community's history and offering engaging and educational activities for community members; this is exactly what Elizabeth and Loren Gardner are doing at Abingdon Vineyards.

Elizabeth and Loren Gardner are the owners of Abingdon Vineyards as of August 2018.

Both originally from California, Loren Gardner brings a long-history of studying, developing and building vineyards and wineries, while his wife, Elizabeth Gardner, brings a background of teaching and running an organic farm-to-table business.

“We believe in respecting the land and the animals... and sustainability,” says Elizabeth Gardner.

Already, the couple has had to experiment with what grapes can be introduced, such as a hybrid grape, what does best on a hillside, and what does well in the Virginia seasons versus California climate.

Loren Gardner explained how the federal government has delayed 9 new wines getting released but noted that the state of Virginia also has to approve them — unlike California where state approval is not necessary following federal approval.

“Everything that we sell has to go through some sort of state regulation,” said Loren Gardner.

“Virginia has a lot of laws antiquated from the Prohibition era,” said Loren Gardner.

According to Virginia Tech’s Virginia Agricultural Research and Extension Centers, “The Commonwealth’s wine industry produces more than 556,000 cases of wine and the industry continues to expand with almost 300 licensed wineries, and approximately 3500 acres of vineyard in 2015.”

Loren Gardner explained how Virginia mandates the percentage of grapes that must come from a region to grant a winery the state’s approval. “Fifty percent has to come from our farm, 75 percent has to come from Virginia, and 25% can be from elsewhere — such as California.”

How does a rural winery make its mark in the community?

Elizabeth Gardner explained how important it is to be “sensitive to the community” and respecting the history of the region.

Both owners highlighted the importance of educating customers, visitors, children and restaurateurs on vineyards, wine, community, organic farming, and — most importantly to the Gardners — sustainability.

The Gardners teach sustainability in teaching how to hunt and use all parts of an animal, how to grow vegetables and spices, how and why to recycle, and what health benefits come from organic self-farming.

In promoting community, the Gardners offer public events such as volunteering, yoga, a book club, musical events, open-fire dinners and more.

The couple explained that wineries in rural communities can actually build business for one another by cross-promoting — a concept that the Gardners have already started using by inviting other wineries to promote their personal products at the Abingdon Vineyards.

Fundera, an online business broker site, published an article about rural companies being “more likely to be profitable than their urban counterparts and have longer survival rates.” Benefits included lower costs, “more stability, a more loyal customer base, and easier access to financing.”