

Grapes/ Winery delving into brandy

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"Really? You really want to go out in the middle of the winter and prune grapes in your retirement?" Harbut said. "It's a very complicated crop to really start with. It's not for the weak of heart. There's a lot to learn and a lot of hard work that has to go into it."

Harbut and others said growing grapes is labor intensive. Sometimes growers don't find that out until they've already planted the crop.

"You manage every vine individually," Harbut said. "That is a real different mindset than a lot of crops. You get to know your vines by name."

Ryan Prellwitz, WGGGA president, grows corn, soybeans, strawberries and grapes at his Ripon farm. He is four years into his 2½-acre grape crop.

"We were looking for additional options reaching out to the public we already serve," he said. "Last year was our first year of harvesting the grapes, so now we're working on testing different wines and wine-making and gaining an understanding of what works best."

Prellwitz said he has seen quite a few farmers who are diversifying away from cash crops or dairy farming into small-scale crops such as grapes.

"This is a very good option," he said. "Table grapes are also a good opportunity for a lot of fruit and vegetable growers to add an additional market. When you get into wine grapes you've got to do more volume."

John and Joan Burch of Lyndon Station planted their first vines last year on property they own near Kendall in Monroe County. John said they have 33 acres they eventually want to plant with grapes.

"We started with a

half-acre," he said. "We're taking it step by step. Our first goal is to become a supplier for Wisconsin wine producers. Within the next 10 years, we'd like to get into some successful winemaking."

John, who retired after 26 years in the military, said he grew up on a dairy farm and has an agricultural background.

"To get back into agriculture is just so refreshing," he said.

Phillippe Coquard, Wollersheim Winery co-owner and vintner, said the winery's sales have been increasing rapidly in recent years, as regional wines have become more popular.

"Midwestern wines are growing and expanding exponentially," Coquard said. "Wisconsin went from a dozen wineries 20 years ago to 53 this year. It's the same way in Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota and Nebraska. There is a growing interest in drinking American wine and drinking regional wines."

Coquard estimated it costs \$5,000 to plant an acre of grapes and more money to put up fences and netting to protect them from deer and birds.

"Before you plant the grapes you have to work with a winery that might be interested in buying your grapes, to find out what quantity and varieties they are looking for," he said.

Wineries generally pay \$1,000 to \$1,500 a ton for grapes. Growers can expect to harvest 4 to 5 tons per acre.

Wollersheim produces 15 wine varieties at its Sauk County winery, Coquard said. Last year's production was 220,000 gallons, or about 1.1 million bottles.

The company plans to make brandy from its grapes this year, Coquard said. Wollersheim will be the first Wisconsin winery to produce brandy.

Jim Massey can be reached at 608-574-8011 or jimmassey@mhtc.net.

Cheese/ Promotion revenue down

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"They needed a home for a bunch of milk, and cheese made sense," he said.

Robson said that when he came to Wisconsin in 2001, he saw industry leaders who were skeptical about the dairy industry's future.

"I heard a lot of people who said, 'Turn out the lights, the party's over,'" Robson said.

The high-water mark for Wisconsin milk production had been in 1988, and had been in a tailspin ever since. But that began to change in 2005, when milk production began to increase.

"In 2008, we broke the 1988 (milk production) mark," Robson said.

California leads the nation in milk production at about 39.5 billion pounds a year, according to the USDA. Wisconsin is second at 25.2 billion pounds.

Wisconsin's milk production is up about 3 billion pounds from 2001, while California milk producers have increased production by about 6.3 billion pounds.

WMMB directors got a first look at the proposed fiscal year 2012 budget last week. The budget estimates 2012 assessment revenue at \$25.7 million — the same as in 2011 — but lower interest and sales promotion revenue are projected to contribute to an \$820,000 revenue decline.

Directors will finalize their 2012 spending proposal in April.

Robson said WMMB officials are proposing that about \$360,000 be spent on a new initiative to target some of the nation's largest pizza, burger and sandwich restaurants to encourage them to use more Wisconsin cheese. Robson said the WMMB would not compete with National Dairy board efforts to work with a few of the largest fast-food chains such as McDonald's.

WMMB director Sarah Lloyd asked if WMMB officials had considered the "risk versus benefits" of trying to sell cheese to the large food chains. She said some of the larger food companies — such as Walmart — end up pushing the price downward by demanding large volumes of product at a low price.

"I want to know we're thinking long-term," Lloyd said. "Is this the market we want, more in commodity and mass production?"

Robson said Wisconsin cheese companies already have identified the restaurant chains they're interested in targeting and would welcome the WMMB's help.

"If we can get more Wisconsin cheese on burgers or pizza it's just plus business," Robson said. "We're not going in with big bags of money and saying create new sandwiches. We're not going to pay the price down. Our focus is not going to be on commodity cheese."

He said the plan calls for WMMB officials to encourage restaurant chains to use more specialty cheeses such as Blue, Havarti, Gouda, Provolone and aged Cheddar instead of just American cheese.

"The number one goal is to get them to buy more Wisconsin cheese," Robson said. "Consumers are asking more and more where their food products are coming from. That works to our favor."

Jim Massey can be reached at 608-574-8011 or jimmassey@mhtc.net.

Deer/ Site will be used for research

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The property was appraised at \$471,000 and was listed with Coldwell Banker of Stevens Point for \$524,900. The DNR said \$465,000 was the best price that could be negotiated with the owner.

"Sometimes somebody has a bargaining chip, and they certainly were willing to use (the fence) as a bargaining chip," Welter said. "I personally wasn't willing to let the health of the deer herd in Portage County and that part of the state be at risk of somebody taking down that fence."

Laurie Seale of Gilman, president of Whitetails of Wisconsin, said the organization supports the DNR's

decision to buy the property.

"We have a number of deer farms in Portage and surrounding counties that would be affected if they would find CWD in the wild if the fence were to be taken down," Seale said. "In order to protect our farms and to prevent CWD, we feel it's important for the fence to remain intact."

Seale said she believes the purchase is an acceptable resolution to the problem until more research can be conducted to prove the disease is not in the farm's soil.

Seale said Whitetails of Wisconsin was opposed to an extension that would have required the owner to keep the fence up beyond the five-year contract.

"Even though we want to see the fence remain

intact, we were opposed to the farmer putting his life on hold for any more time without compensation," Seale said. "We feel that is taking of his property. That's why we're so supportive of the DNR purchasing that property."

The farm is in south-central Portage County about 12 miles southeast of Plover in the town of Almond. As part of the purchase plan, the DNR will prohibit public use of the land to ensure confinement of contaminated soil. It will be used as a research and wildlife management site.

Stewardship Program funding traditionally is used for land that will be open to the public.

"I think (DNR Secretary Cathy Stepp) considered that

when the matter was recommended to us for purchase, and yes, this is an appropriate place for Stewardship funds to be used," Welter said. "I think it would be irresponsible to open that property in a fashion that would allow that wild deer herd to be infected with CWD."

More than 1,200 wild deer have been tested for CWD since 2002 in Portage County, with no positives, according to the DNR.

DNR officials said they will consider at a later date selling a single-family home that is on the site if local zoning can be modified for a lot size that would not contain contaminated soil.

Sara Bredesen can be reached at 715-360-7253 or sbrede@gmail.com.

Office/ Monroe facility to be open full-time

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Badgerland Financial provides financial products and services to member-borrowers in 33 southern Wisconsin counties. The co-op had a record loan volume of \$3 billion in 2010. Badgerland Financial is part of the nationwide Farm Credit System.

Bruce Thompson, Badgerland Financial senior vice president and chief credit officer, said the decision to close the Darlington office was part of a restructuring plan that also resulted in offices closing in Black River Falls, Richland Cen-



Thompson

ter, Mount Horeb and Prairie du Chien.

When the closures are complete, Badgerland will have 15 offices.

"Our board and management for more than a year did an extensive study of all of our offices in our entire territory," Thompson said. "Darlington isn't the only office we decided we would make changes to. The decision wasn't made lightly. There were numerous discussions with the board before the

decision was made."

Thompson said closing the Darlington office was more about improving efficiency than cutting costs.

"We've closed over the years a lot of our brick-and-mortar offices since 1995," Thompson said. "In all cases, we've been able to grow our business and provide better service."

"When you have a number of small offices, they're hard to staff all the time. It's easier to use some efficiencies if you have a bigger office where you have specialists for all of our services and multiple loan officers to serve their needs."

Thompson said Badgerland's service focuses on on-farm and in-home service.

"We encourage our staff to get out and provide better service rather than being tied to brick-and-mortar," he said. "What we heard from the Lafayette County people is they wanted an office with nearby face-to-face contact. Some said they don't want to have to deal with a computer."

"We can serve customers very effectively without having an office in every community. We would rather have our staff out on farms talking to people than tied to an office waiting for someone to come in."

Kuhle said Lafayette County is the most agriculturally dependent county in Wisconsin, so there are a lot of farmers who need the services provided by Badgerland Financial.

Leon Wolfe, a Badgerland

member from Darlington, said that while the Lafayette County members made their case well, he's not sure whether their pleas will change the decision.

"I'm not sure we turned any heads," he said. "There will be another (board) meeting in April, and whether they'll bring it up again, I don't know. The decision has been made. To get them to reverse that takes quite a bit."

Wolfe said Badgerland officials said they would send loan officers to farms and rural residences, but most Lafayette County borrowers said they would rather go to an office.

"Several active borrowers said they'd be looking elsewhere for financial services," Wolfe said. "We have good banks in Darlington and Lafayette County that I'm sure would be anxious to pick up the trade."

Thompson said the Badgerland board of directors told the Lafayette County contingent that they would consider their input and further discuss the decision.

"They'll take into account what they heard and other factors," Thompson said. "They're trying to make the best decisions for the entire membership."

Thompson said the Monroe office would expand from part-time to full-time once the Darlington office closes, so Lafayette County members could go to Monroe or Dodgeville offices, both within a 40-minute drive.

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The Country Today is a rural oriented, independent newspaper mailed each week to farm households and agribusinesses in Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Michigan and elsewhere.

Periodicals postage paid at Eau Claire, WI 54701

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to 701 S. Farwell St., P.O. Box 570, Eau Claire, WI 54702. Telephone toll free 1-800-236-4004. Advertising/Editorial fax 715-858-7307.

Subscription rates are: \$25 for six months, \$35 for one year and \$55 for two years. Single copy \$1.00

THE COUNTRY TODAY is located at 701 S. Farwell St., P.O. Box 570, Eau Claire, WI 54702, with publishing facilities in the Eau Claire Press Company building at 701 S. Farwell St., Eau Claire, and is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Eau Claire Press Co. (ISN: 0192-9658)

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