

FROM NATO TO MERLOT

HICKORY CREEK WINERY IN BUCHANAN HITS THE GROUND RUNNING

BY GREG TASKER

Stop by the tasting room in the big red barn at Hickory Creek Winery and there's a good chance you'll find owner Adam McBride behind the counter, pouring samples of Riesling, Merlot or other iconic varietals.

He's the man behind the handful of wines being produced at Hickory Creek, a boutique winery set amid the rolling farmland in the Lake Michigan Shore American Viticultural Area, in the southwest corner of the state. McBride, 42, is the owner and winemaker at Hickory Creek Winery, named after a stream that runs along the western edge of the 38-acre farm.

Owning a winery, of course, is a year-round endeavor.

In the winter and spring, McBride is in and out of the barn. He's finishing the white wines and barreling the reds, from grapes harvested in the fall. This spring, he'll begin bottling some of the dozen or so wines typically found on his tasting room menu. In the vineyard, there's pruning and cutting back the growth from the previous year.

It's physically and mentally exhausting work, for sure, but McBride is living his dream, one he cultivated for years. His passion for wine was awakened while he was stationed with the U.S. Air Force in southwestern Germany, where he worked as a

NATO officer. He lived about an hour away from base in the Mosel Valley, a region famous for classic riesling wines.

"I really caught the wine bug," McBride says, noting he became immersed in wine culture, attending festivals, tastings, and wine pairing dinners. "The seed was planted in me that one day I would have my own winery."

Returning to the States in 2007, McBride pursued a career in logistics, working with two of West Michigan's biggest companies, Steelcase Inc., the office furniture manufacturer in Grand Rapids, and Stryker Corp., the medical technologies firm in Kalamazoo.

"I never lost my excitement for the wine industry," he points out.

He returned to his alma mater, Michigan State University, to get his MBA, believing the business background would help

him successfully run a winery.

Educating himself about wine also became a priority. He started making wine from kits in his kitchen, initially from boxes of juice concentrate before branching out to buying local juice from Fenn Valley Vineyards. He also traveled to the Napa Valley to take courses at the Napa Valley Wine Academy (a satellite program is now offered at Hickory Creek). McBride achieved the



Owner/Winemaker Adam McBride

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Education Trust certification, WSET Level 3 Advanced.

McBride is still learning, while juggling the winery and other responsibilities. He's in the second year of the two-year Wine and Viticulture Program at Lake Michigan College in Benton Harbor. He commutes to and from his home in downtown Grand Rapids and also is a single father to two daughters, ages 10 and 12.

About a decade after his return to the U.S., McBride was ready to leap into the wine business and purchased Hickory Creek Winery, a rare turnkey find in the industry. He had been looking around for potential vineyard sites and found Hickory Creek on an agricultural real estate listing. One cold winter day, he stopped by to do some tasting and explore the property.

"A lot of Michigan wines have a reputation for being sweet, but the Hickory Creek's wines were dry, interesting and complex. There was a good mix of white and red wines," he recalls. "Their 2016 unoaked Chardonnay stood out to me. The riesling was interesting and the wine style brought me back to the Mosel Valley.

He also liked the property. The barn, which also houses his production facility, lab, office and event space, was patterned after a horse livery. A winemaker's quarters, available as a vacation rental, is modeled after a Victorian-style cottage you might find in Australia. It boasts wood plank floors, an open floor plan, and plentiful west-facing windows overlooks the creek and wetlands, a magnet for turkeys, deer and other wildlife. A local farmer leases about 30 acres for crops.

"The winery was a good fit for me from the beginning," he adds. "Everything felt right."

McBride took ownership in September 2017, in time for the harvest. He jumped right in, crushing and de-stemming the grape clusters, pressing, running lab analysis, fermenting and other production tasks. He also faced an unexpected challenge: inventory levels at Hickory Creek were dire.

"I hit the ground running. There wasn't a lot of wine in the winery when I bought it," he recalls, noting the harvests in 2014 and 2015 were poor because of inclement weather. "I was scrounging for pretty much any grapes I could get my hands on. I was lucky to find some amazing farmers to partner with from the very beginning."

The previous owner stayed on as a consultant, "a great resource and good advisor to me." He also found support in the local wine community, especially from Wally Maurer, owner and winemaker at Domaine Berrien Cellars near Berrien

Springs and Joe Herman, owner of Karma Vista Vineyard & Winery near Coloma.

"It was all a breath of fresh air," he says. "It caught me off guard coming out of corporate America, where the competition is cutthroat. Here, the other wineries want you to succeed. The better one winery does, the more people will come to Michigan and the better we all do."

McBride has made no significant changes to the winery. Bountiful harvests the past two years have helped him restock inventory. He harvested 18 tons in 2017 and 20 tons last year, most of the grapes coming from nearby farms.

"It might not sound like a lot, but it's very big for me," he says.

McBride leans on a small core team, including close friends and family, who assist in the tasting room and perform a host of other tasks, including pressing and bottling.

He counts his tasting room staff as his most important resource. "They're not reading from a card," he says about his tasting consultants. "You're coming in the tasting room and talking to somebody who was probably involved in the crushing, the pressing and bottling of the wine they are pouring."

McBride also made it a point to put his entire team, even seasonal employees, through much of the same wine training he received in Napa Valley. Having an approachable staff knowledgeable about wine is critical to the guest experience in the tasting room. "It makes all the difference in the world," he says.



By most measures, Hickory Creek Winery is a small operation, producing about 1,500 cases a year. It's the smallest winery on the Lake Michigan Shore Wine Trail, which extends from Fennville to New Buffalo and is home to 20 wineries.

That smallness is beneficial.

You have a really good chance of interacting with me as the wine owner and winemaker," he says, noting that guests are often surprised to find "the owner" in the tasting room. About 12,000 people visit the winery each year.

What's ahead for Hickory Creek? McBride is hopeful for another bountiful harvest in 2019. He'd like to upgrade his production facility to bottle more wine, 3,000 to 4,000 cases a

year. More inventory would help him expand his reach in the region. He'd like to see his wines on restaurant menus beyond southwestern Michigan - Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, South Bend, Ind., and Chicago.

"We're going to continue to make really, really good wine," he says. "We're going to use vinifera varietals as much as possible and keep making dry to off-dry wines that show off the amazing fruit our region is capable of producing. I've visited many great wine regions and have tasted wines all over the country and around the world. There's no reason Michigan can't become a world-class wine destination."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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