

# Novices create award-winning winery in Pilesgrove

By DANIEL WALSH Staff Writer, 856-649-2074 | Posted: Thursday, August 20, 2009



Winemaker Julianne Donnini checks on ripening merlot grapes Aug. 5 at Auburn Road Vineyard and Winery in Pilesgrove Township. The new winery has won numerous awards.

Photo by: Michael Ein

**PILESGROVE TOWNSHIP** - The story goes like this: Three young couples sit in Philadelphia, sharing some beers and commiserating over their dissatisfaction with their corporate careers. They're not happy with their lives. They want something more.

So, despite having no experience even remotely qualifying them for it, they decide to buy a farm and start a winery called [Auburn Road Vineyard and Winery](#). Two even quit their jobs and sell their house to do it.

Fast forward seven years, and you'll find them making tasty, affordable wine in rural Salem County.

People actually come and pay them to drink it. Competitions, such as the Finger Lakes International Wine Competition, give them awards because their wine tastes so good. On weekends, people flock to the pole barn they converted into a wine bar for dinner, wine, music, company and even foosball.

"When I tried it, I was like, 'You know, this is pretty good,'" said Patty White, a regular at Auburn Road who lives nearby,

How on Earth did they pull this off?

And what possessed them to think they could?

"I guess it never occurred to us that we couldn't," said Shannon Kilpatrick, one of Auburn Road's partners. "I guess it was just a question of how hard we worked."

Auburn Road's winemaker, Julianne Donnini, described the group as a collection of "conservatives, extremists, dreamers and desperates" back in the early 2000s. Most were in their 30s, starting families,

working in law, accounting and sales. Donnini and her husband, Scott, were living in Philadelphia. Scott Donnini was the only wine drinker in the group, having spent four years living in Rome and Milan as a child.

"I actually started a winery with five beer drinkers," Scott Donnini said. "We realized we weren't qualified to do a damn thing other than what we already did. So we began to think about what did we want to do, how did we want to live."

What they wanted was life in a rural area like Salem County, with their children close and their business part of the local community.

Somewhere along the line, somebody proposed starting a winery. Never mind that they didn't know anything about wine. That was the solution they devised.

So Scott Donnini and Dave Davis, Kilpatrick's husband, bought some grapes and a do-it-yourself winemaking kit and made their first batch of wine.

"We started making it with this cube kit, and it was just terrible," Scott Donnini said.

"My wife said, 'Let me handle the wine,'" he said.

The Donninis and their partners now look back flippantly, with self-deprecating humor, perhaps because Julianne Donnini turned out to have an able hand with the winemaking. She went to work doing the trial-and-error routine and eventually hired a consultant and took courses through the University of California-Davis.

The winery was still half a pipe dream until Scott Donnini's father died in December 2002. The son mourned for a while and then, after a talk with Davis, decided to take the money his father left him and put it to use. The Donninis dropped \$463,000 on the 16-acre farmstead in Pilesgrove and eventually sold their Philadelphia home and quit their jobs to work at the winery full time. Kilpatrick's sister, Jennifer, and her boyfriend, Joe Reilly, joined the other two couples in the partnership.

Over the next years, the couples would see their lives change drastically. They bore and raised children, and they did the same with a winery. Each proved to be a great deal of work. Davis, who lives in nearby Woolwich Township, or Scott Donnini would start some days in the fields at 5:30 a.m. and finish around 11 p.m. (Today, Davis still juggles a financial job in Wilmington with his viticulture work.)

When they first planted vines at the farm in 2004, none of them knew how to drive a tractor, Kilpatrick recalled. They didn't even have one. They ended up borrowing neighbor Ross Fields' tractor, and he taught them how to drive it. They started renovating the farm buildings for winemaking and a wine bar in 2005 before they were convinced they could make good wine.

"I kept pushing everyone along, thinking we'd figure it out," Scott Donnini said. "Yeah, it's pretty, and it's a nice setup, but if the wines suck, who's going to come back?"

Four years later, the winery is open, people are coming back, and Auburn Road is making money.

Gary and Marlene Kerestes stopped in early this month while driving home to Pittsburgh after a weeklong vacation in Wildwood. They had seen the signs on Route 40 pointing to the winery on the trip into New Jersey.

"Well, it has a good flavor to it, so when we're here next year, we'll probably buy a few more bottles," Gary Kerestes said, after buying a bottle. The wines average in price from \$10 to \$20 per bottle.

Auburn Road has tried to combine their wines with a laidback, family-friendly atmosphere to create a social hub for families. Woodstown Music owner Larry Kulp organizes small concerts every Saturday night at the winery, featuring wine, Italian cheeses and local singer-songwriters such as Kelly Ricketts and Bo Raines.

Auburn Road has modeled its wine bar, which is open weekends, after Italian wine bars, and they have a foosball table inside to testify to the family nature of it. Couples come in with their children, and the Donninis' small sons wander around the winery as well.

"Instantly, you like them," said Cindy Pokrzywa of Woodstown, another regular at the winery. "It's so different from getting in your car and going to a bar. It's the tasting room; you're seeing local musicians. You're not just supporting local wines; you're also supporting local musicians."

The wine culture in New Jersey is still relatively young, with few wineries existing until the last decade. Whereas numerous New Jersey farmers have sold land to residential developers over the last 25 years, wine is actually a growth industry in the state, with more than 30 wineries now open. The Garden State has long been known for its fruit crops, such as blueberries, cranberries and tomatoes, but it also has a rich history with grapes. Nearby Vineland was named after the fruit, and the Welch's grapes company started there.

Still, time will tell how many New Jersey wineries gain respect and patrons beyond their localities. Auburn Road's silver medal at the Finger Lakes wine competition for their 2007 Classico, a blend of several red wines, may help.

"Zippy the Wonder Monkey could grow this in California," Scott Donnini said. "It's not easy growing grapes in New Jersey. Mind you, your climate is a lot like that in Bordeaux. It's not easy to grow grapes there either."

Of course, France's Bordeaux region is, as [Intowine.com](http://Intowine.com) put it, "arguably the greatest wine region in the world." If New Jersey can some day come anywhere near that, it could bode well for Auburn Road and some of the other dreamers and desperates out there.

E-mail Daniel Walsh:

[DWalsh@pressofac.com](mailto:DWalsh@pressofac.com)