



Pursuing the Dream

Lifestyle business bears fruit at Woodland Hill Winery. **BY JOHN P. PALEN**

THE DICKERMANS SEEMED to have it all: great careers—Mike as an engineering sales director, Katie a manicurist. They had all the toys—a personal plane, a yacht and a recreational vehicle ready to travel at a moment's notice with the family. Primed for a future of well-earned ease, they embodied what most would call the American dream.

But not Mike and Katie. They had other ideas that included cashing in all their toys for 20 acres of former corn and soybean fields along with an old farmstead in Delano. The call for a different life started with Mike's beer-making hobby about 20 years ago. Then, about 12 years ago, with wine in barrels and drums in his basement. But I hardly thought Mike was serious back then when he brought up the idea of establishing a vineyard and winery.

I thought they were crazy. There were so many odds against them. They didn't know the first thing about growing grapes. They didn't want to pursue any outside financing. And then there's the crazy Minnesota climate. I enjoy wine, but Minnesota wines had previously always left me cold.

« Mike and Katie Dickerman tend to the harvest.

TAKING THE PLUNGE

Still, you can't discount an entrepreneur's determined spirit and optimism. The Dickermans proceeded to absorb everything they could possibly find on the science of growing grape varieties—from University of Minnesota research to the Old World techniques of Europe. Mike's engineer mind dug into details about how trellis systems were

BIZ BRIEFING

Woodland Hill Winery

Headquarters: Delano

Inception: 2004

First vintage: 2007

Employees: Two full-time, 13 part-time (in addition to grape-stomping family and friends)

Description: Vineyard, winery, tasting room, gift shop and event center on the farm

Website: woodlandhillwinery.com

LEADER PROFILES

Katie Dickerman: Owner

Mike Dickerman: Owner and VP of sales for Hutchinson Manufacturing

Alana Dickerman: Chief Daughter Officer

Vinny and Syrah: Winery golden retrievers

HOW TO CHASE YOUR ENTREPRENEURIAL DREAM

BY MIKE AND KATIE DICKERMAN

1

When you have a dream and you are passionate about it, **give yourself permission to go for it** and prove you're right.

2

Nevermind the naysayers. Don't let people squash your dreams and derail you. **Stay focused and persevere.**

3

The way other people do things are not necessarily the right or best way. **Be innovative and creative to find how to get the best results.**

4

Find your magic formula for risk tolerance. Predetermine all best and worst-case scenarios. No matter how things happen, you've got a plan to follow.

5

Maintain an attitude that realizes **there are no mistakes** and there is no failure: There is only learning.

built to support vine growth. His farming background helped determine healthy methods for planting, treating and maintaining.

"We use sustainable farming techniques. We have to get the soil right with organic natural matter so our plants are healthier and stronger," Mike says. He designed and invented a weeding device that attaches to his tractor and removes weeds while tilling the soil in a highly productive and efficient fashion, leaving the soil more nutrient-rich.

The Dickermans moved their lives to the farm, calling it Woodland Hill. They enlisted the help of friends, family and part-time employees. They would have to find a market for their new product. Oh, and did I mention that grapes aren't ready to become wine until the vines are at least three years old?

Mike has kept his day job while pursuing his dream—working nights and weekends on the farm. "I've enjoyed it so much, being out in the fields, learning the chemistry; it doesn't seem like work," he says.

Katie, meanwhile, has focused on the marketing and hospitality, creating beautiful garden-accented grounds, a gift shop and tasting room, and methods to attract and encourage people to linger at Woodland Hill for a day or evening of fun. Just for an added dimension, the Dickermans also have a teenage daughter to raise.

REAPING REWARDS

The results eight years later astounded even the astute U of M horticulturalists. Mike's unconventional techniques have resulted in exceptional quality and quantity of vines and grapes. Mike and Katie have a very "green" approach to their methods. Their pro-


duction rate, quality and capacity have become one of the most impressive operations in the region, producing 18 different wines.

"We rely on our own vineyard. Our growing techniques produce high-quality grapes that are key to making finer quality wines," Mike says.

In 2010, Woodland Hill won eight medals at the prestigious International Cold Climate Wine Competition, a partnership of the Minnesota Wine Growers Association, the Minnesota State Fair and University of Minnesota.

Almost every weekend of the year, there is an atmosphere of playful energy at the farm, whether it's an art fair, dance lessons, summer wedding, fall bonfire or sleigh rides. Often, there is live music. The combination of Mike's chemistry and farming skills and Katie's flair for entertaining have created an escape to the country that attracts people from all walks of life.

The common denominator is wine, of course. And I must admit that I am impressed by the high quality and really like the wines that Mike and Katie have created. I must also admit that I am amazed at how their determination and ingenuity have achieved such incredible success in their business venture. It just goes to show that the dream is alive and well in Minnesota—and it can be deliciously different for everyone.

What's your dream? It could be less far-fetched than you think. 



« **John P. Palen** is CEO of Allied Executives (jppalen@alliedexecutives.com) and works with CEOs, business owners and executive leaders on leadership development and business performance improvement through peer groups, coaching and educational workshops. alliedexecutives.com

heart

(härt)

Adj. O.E. *heorte*, *khertan* Latin

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MN Branch Contact Information

2780 Snelling Ave. N. #101
Roseville, MN 55113
Phone: (763) 287-3122
www.securitasinc.com