

# HOME GROWN

## IN MACOMB

BY CORTNEY CASEY

Jessica Youngblood grew up in a family that made its own wine, beer and cordials. Her husband, David, grew up in a family with an agricultural background.

Their ancestral skill sets have come together in a single mission at Youngblood Vineyard in Ray Township, where they're growing grapes destined to become wine.

Their farmland in northern Macomb County — in David's family since 1945 — previously produced soybeans, corn and Christmas trees. Now, it's home to 25 acres of cold-hardy hybrids, designed to withstand the brutal winters common to southeastern Michigan.

The goal was to transform the farm into wine country, says Jessica. "That's one piece that we felt was missing from Metro Detroit: There are no commercial vineyards in this area, and we just thought this was a great place to grow grapes."

Come this May (if the government cooperates), the Youngbloods plan to take their endeavor to the next level by opening a tasting room for wines produced from their estate-grown grapes.



The Youngblood family

### IT TAKES A VILLAGE

The Youngbloods' passion for wine took root during visits to Virginia wine country while living in metropolitan Washington, D.C. They took note that most of the wineries had their own vineyards attached.

In 2015, the couple returned to Ray Township with a dream and determination to start their own vineyard and winery.

Over the next three years, the Youngbloods planted 25 acres of grapes, including Prairie Star, Petite Pearl, Frontenac, Frontenac Blanc, Marquette and Itasca.

"We researched all the right types of grapes that would grow in this area and we finally focused in on grapes from the University of Minnesota," says Jessica. "These grapes are all cold-climate grapes that can sustain winter temperatures of minus 40 degrees."

With limitations on space and intentions to make exclusively estate-grown wine, they needed to pick grapes that would blend well with one another, she adds.

All of the planting was done with the assistance of their family — including children Georgia, 13; Gracie, 12; and Wyatt, 10 — and a cadre of local volunteers. Harvest is conducted the same way.

Jessica says the enthusiasm of the surrounding community was among the most surprising factors of converting to farm life. A harvest day in the fall of 2018 saw a record 75 volunteers show up at the farm, the majority of whom were newcomers. The next day, many of those same people returned to help again, this time with other family members and friends in tow.

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“(It’s) unbelievable small town generosity,” says Jessica. “We do really depend on people in this community to help us out, since we’re just now new and getting started.”

Originally lured by the prospect of helping pick Petite Pearl, one of his favorite grapes, Chesterfield Township resident Adam Hiltunen is a repeat volunteer at the vineyard.

“I find the experience really relaxing, if you can believe that,” he says. “What surprised me most was how much the entire family helps out.

“It’s amazing to have a vineyard practically in my backyard,” he adds. “It’s great how much they share on Facebook every step along the way to making wine.”

Jessica says it’s all part of their business model to maintain a teaching/learning vineyard.

“Everything that we’re doing as we’re building this vineyard and establishing it — from planting the grapes, from the research we’ve done, all the way to the winemaking process — we post videos, we post pictures, we invite people to come out and experience it firsthand so we can really explain the whole process to people,” she says. “We feel that that’s really important.”

With a portion of their vines now at maturity for producing wine-worthy grapes, the Youngbloods have their sights set on a Memorial Day weekend opening for their long-awaited tasting room.

The facility will be open seasonally and feature an outdoor pavilion. Guests will be able to walk the property “and actually see the vines and experience wine country,” says Jessica.

The Youngbloods plan to launch with a lineup of about five wines: a mixture of red, white, sweet, dry and off-dry.

“We’ll have, hopefully, something for everybody here,” says Jessica.

## REAPING THE REWARDS

The challenges the Youngbloods face as grape growers in southeastern Michigan mirror those felt by growers throughout the state: disease pressures, precipitation, brutally cold temperatures, etc., says Jessica.

“We’re always concerned about weather — those are things that we just can’t control,” she says. “This is hard. I think after doing this for three years and the time that we’ve spent on this, it’s expensive and it’s really — it is a lot of work. We’re out pruning in the middle of winter when it’s zero degrees and we’re out working in the summer when it’s 105.”

Knowing it might be years before the vineyard turned a profit, the offer from other wineries to make non-estate wine for Youngblood to sell initially, buoying them until their own grapes were ready, was tempting, Jessica says.

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“But our philosophy is estate-grown wine, so that was ... not what we really wanted,” she says. “We are creating a lifestyle for our kids, teaching them work ethic and family values that I hope will stick with them when they leave home.

“There is no immediate gratification or guarantees in farming or winemaking. It’s a long process. But there is nothing like seeing all your hard work, day after day, when bud break and harvest come. Creating something beautiful out of soybeans and old, dead trees is pretty satisfying.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Cortney Casey** is a certified sommelier and co-founder of MichiganByTheBottle.com, a website and online community that promotes the entire Michigan wine industry. She’s also co-owner of Michigan By The Bottle Tasting Room, tasting rooms operated in partnership with multiple Michigan wineries, located in Shelby Township, Royal Oak and Auburn Hills. Contact her at [cort@michiganbythebottle.com](mailto:cort@michiganbythebottle.com).



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