

Kentucky vintner's diverse enterprise hosts unlikely farmhands

Old-world sheep weed, fertilize and prove to be a big draw for cash customers.

By David Mudd



January 17, 2008: Lawrence, Kansas, native Jennifer Dreiling admits that when she came to Smith-Berry Vineyard and Winery (www.smithberrywinery.net) near New Castle, Kentucky, in mid-September she didn't expect to spend quite as much time as she did pointing her camera at the sheep grazing among the vines.

With help from Outstanding in the Field, a traveling troupe of local-food enthusiasts, the Smith-Berry Vineyard is transformed into an outdoor fine-dining experience.

After all, Dreiling herself was there to graze—lavishly. Visiting family in Louisville for the weekend, she drove with her sister 40 minutes northeast to New Castle to attend a dinner served at a long, white-linen-draped table plunked right down in the middle of Smith-Berry's 5-acre vineyard.

The dinner was orchestrated by a nation-wandering troupe of local-foods enthusiasts who call themselves Outstanding in the Field, and prepared by Louisville chef and restaurateur Kathy Cary. Sixty others participated, and from late afternoon until dark on a sparkling late-summer day, they feasted on a variety of goat-cheese appetizers, Smith-Berry wines, entrees of roasted chicken—"pulled," barbecue style—and slow-cooked lamb, butternut squash soup and apple crisp topped with goat-cheese ice cream. All the ingredients were produced on-site or within 100 miles of the vineyard, with the exception of the Michigan apples brought in because a late-spring frost had killed most Kentucky apple blossoms.

Dreiling, a producer for Hallmark cards, brought her camera because she expected a picturesque experience, based on what she learned about other such dinners around the country on Outstanding in the Field's website (www.outstandinginthefield.com) and in magazine articles she'd read about the group. She wasn't disappointed.

"It really was stunning—everything from the food to a brilliant sunset, and the views from the vineyard across the countryside," Dreiling said. "It would have been nicer if they hadn't had so little rain," she added, referring to the brown pastures and other obvious effects of Kentucky's protracted drought, "but it was lovely all the same, and a beautiful setting for a dinner."

The charm of sheep

Dreiling said she took the time to include the camera-shy sheep in her pictures of the event because they added to the charm. "It seemed very 'old school,' to me, like something you'd see in vineyards in France or Italy. It made me think I was on a farm that wasn't mechanically driven, and I liked that a lot."



Twenty-one Border Cheviot sheep patrol the Smith-Berry vineyard, keeping weeds down, providing fertility and delighting visitors. The Scottish sheep, provided by Chuck Smith's father-in-law Wendell Berry, represent one of the world's oldest breeds.

Vintner Chuck Smith recognizes the allure, and says it's part of the reason he introduced 21 Border Cheviot sheep into his mature grape stand early last summer.

"People just like looking at them," he said. "It leads to a little more foot traffic through the vineyards than I might like, especially as dry as it's been this year. But it sure does seem to make people happy, and that's what this is all about."

He's talking about his family's evolving efforts to farm sustainably, and leave something for his three daughters if he and wife Mary Berry Smith ever choose to retire.

Over the 25 years since the Smiths bought their 180 acres, those efforts have included dairying, tobacco, participation in a community supported agriculture project, organic produce, pastured poultry, and now a bustling 5-year-old wine business supplemented by a small organic beef-cattle operation.

The Smiths are pioneers of the resurgent Kentucky grape and wine industry. When they planted their first single-acre stand of vines in 2000, there were only five licensed vineyards in the state, according to Chuck Smith, who is vice president of the Kentucky Vineyard Society. There are now more than 40, he said.

That means increased competition, which the Smiths are meeting in a variety of ways.

As one example, they've expanded their wine list. Using a combination of his own grapes, grapes purchased from other Kentucky vineyards and juice he buys from Arkansas and Missouri vineyards—as well as varied aging, fermenting and storage methods—Smith has introduced 15 whites and reds over five years, with two more debuting this year.

They're also expanding their marketing efforts and repertoire of other offerings. While most wine sales take place on-site—in a converted buggy shed that serves as the tasting room—Smith-Berry wines are also carried now by several fine-dining restaurants and a wine shop in Louisville, as well as another wine shop 60 miles away in Midway—a tourist-oriented small town in the state's bluegrass region.

The winery, once the Smiths' dairy barn, houses an art gallery that hosts rotating shows by local painters, potters and photographers. And along with the adjacent pergola, it's in increasing demand as a site for weddings, receptions and dinners.



Farmer/vintner Chuck Smith chats it up with guests.

The vineyard also presents local-talent concerts accompanied by home-cooked meals two Saturdays each month, from Memorial Day through the end of September. The events are

intended to accommodate 400 guests, and they usually sell out. Adults pay \$18.95 for admission to the concert and an all-you-can-eat meal typically made up of Chuck's own slow-cooked, pulled-pork barbecue, other grilled meats, grilled corn on the cob and side dishes Mary prepares in the winery's commercial-grade kitchen. Wine is available for purchase by the glass or bottle at the concerts.

With offerings like these—as well as the occasional extra-curricular event like the Outstanding in the Field dinner—Smith-Berry has become the kind of place the Smiths aimed for from the start: a destination point.

Providing the whole show

"We're just far enough from places like Louisville and Cincinnati that, if you want to get people here to buy some wine, you've got to give them the whole show: a tasting room, and tour of the winery, concerts, access to the vineyards—something they can do and see after going to the effort to get here," Chuck Smith said.



The Smiths' diverse portfolio of offerings to guests include wine tastings, tours, concerts and fancy gourmet as well as buffet-style dinners.

for many years.

"I wanted that particular breed, from Scotland, because they're bred for slopes and coarse pasture, which is what I've got—hills and fescue," Berry said. He and his wife Tanya market the sheep to a list of individuals and restaurants built up over the years, and were entirely content with the size and scope of their operation until son-in-law Chuck asked them in late spring about placing weaned lambs in the vineyard.

"It hadn't really occurred to me he could do that until he mentioned it," Berry said. "I've known for years about what people called 'orchard flocks'—the sheep they allowed to graze through orchards to keep the weeds down and to eat the spoiled fruit, to keep pests away—but I didn't think about it working in a vineyard until Chuck said something about it."

And it is an unusual practice in Kentucky. Both the University of Kentucky's chief enologist and horticulturist reported not having encountered any other vintners in the state with livestock grazing in their vineyards—not by design, anyway.

Berry said he asked a fellow Cheviot breeder who lives out west about it, though, and learned it's not at all uncommon to find sheep at work in vineyards in California, and in France, and for some very good reasons.

Research boosts sheep utility

And once he could afford the \$8,000 it cost to erect a proper fence around his vineyard, the sheep—along with a lone llama to protect them from the occasional wild dog or coyote—became part of the show. "It's not a petting zoo," Smith said. "The sheep keep away from people for the most part, and nobody even tries to get close to the llama—he intimidates them even though he's pretty gentle once he knows you."

Petting zoo or not, Smith said more people have been inspired to stroll through the vines now that the sheep have taken up residence there, and it's alright by him. "I haven't studied it, but I think people tend to buy more wine the longer they stay around the place. And they come back more often. So if the sheep are an attraction, I'm getting at least a 'two-fer;' I get my weeds and grass eaten, and I give people another reason to come."

And if that makes him happy, Smith said his father-in-law, who actually owns the sheep, is "downright giggly" about the situation. That means a lot when your father-in-law is Wendell Berry. Berry, the poet, essayist, novelist, and sheep farmer, has raised purebred Border Cheviots on his nearby farm

Debby Zygielbaum, a livestock manager at Robert Sinskey Vineyards in California's Napa Valley, published a 2005 paper about her employer's long-standing use of sheep, on the website of the Napa Valley Sustainable Winegrowing Group. In her paper, she stated that sheep "really do fit well in our soil management program. Sheep manure is higher in NPK than either cow or horse manure," though she noted, "this is a general rule, as it can vary with feed."

She added that, "because sheep make use of ingested sulfur compounds to produce wool, their manure does not have the unpleasant smelling sulfides found in cow manure."

Zygielbaum also quoted from the book she uses as her guide to sheep management, [Raising Sheep the Modern Way](#), by Paula Simmons (Storey, 1989), to list other advantages sheep bring to vineyards—and leave behind:

- "Sheep manure falls in separate pellets, or in pellets that hold together in a clump, and . . . does not even need aging."
- "That means it does not lay on top of the cover crop and smother it."
- "Since the manure contains many of the valuable elements taken from the soil by the plants eaten by the sheep, it is convenient that they spread a lot of it."

"What a deal! Plus, we suspect that the manure is also good for our soil microbes."

But won't sheep eat the vines and fruit in a vineyard?

The accompanying photo provides proof that's exactly what they'll do, but it's a bit misleading, Smith said. The sheep in the picture was bottle-fed as a new lamb and has been more brazen and less people-averse as a result. "He's the only one who's ever thought of climbing up the trellis wires that way," Smith said.



Sheep will sometimes strip grape leaves from low-hanging branches, but they seldom get as brazen as this young buck, who was bottle fed as a kid.

Every member of the flock, however, has been known to strip leaves from low-hanging branches. "But once I pruned, which I needed to anyway," Smith said, "that problem went away. They just don't seem to worry about overhead forage the way a goat will. If they can reach it, they'll eat it, but if they can't they just keep their heads down and eat what's on the ground."

Berry said the small stature of the Cheviots breed works in Smith's favor, too. "Chuck's vines are mature and trellised pretty high by now, so even if they tried really hard—which they don't seem to—to get at the leaves, they can't."


And even then, researchers at the University of California at Davis College of Agriculture say it's possible to "train" sheep to avoid grape leaves altogether. In experiments they've written about recently, they allowed sheep to eat their fill of leaves and grapes, then injected them with a harmless drug that induced a short period of nausea. The sheep got the point. They tended to avoid grape leaves from then on, for as long as nine months after the experience.

What it all comes down to is management, Smith said. "I talked to some of the people in California, too, and they told me sheep won't strip the bark off vines the way goats will, but they'll eat the young shoots in the spring, so you've got to be sure not to give them access until you've determined how you want your vines to go. Then just be aware that if there's a leaf within easy reach they'll probably get it unless you protect it—or teach them not to like the taste."

Smith said he's looking forward to another growing season with the sheep. He's hoping winter breaks the drought, and if so he intends to increase his numbers by next spring.

"I think the 5 acres could handle about 40 sheep in a normal year," he said.

And his supplier's ready. Father-in-law Berry reported a fall lambing of more than 20 kids at his place and can easily see them working the Smith-Berry vineyard by spring.

"I'm always interested in how a diversified farm evolves and adopts new activities," Berry said, "and I'm proud to be part of it and benefit from it." 

David Mudd is a writer and editor who lives on a 12-acre farm in Anderson County, KY. His credits include farmer profiles in several SARE publications, essays in the Washington Post, and articles on public policy for the Kentucky Journal and City magazine.

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