

Posted on Sun, Mar. 05, 2006

REDLAND

Wine flowing after storm delays

The Schnebly Winery is rebounding after enduring a long hurricane season and even longer delays getting county permits.

By David Goodhue

dgoodhue@MiamiHerald.com

The Schnebly Winery in the Redland took a hit during last year's busy storm season -- particularly from its parting punch, Hurricane Wilma.

"We lost about \$150,000 worth of fruit," said Peter Schnebly, who owns the business with his wife, Denisse. "Some of our trees are out of the ground completely. Financially, it's awful."

The storm damage was yet another hurdle for a business already facing permitting and legal delays that kept the couple from selling about 2,500 gallons of tropical fruit wine they had made over the last two years.

Ironically, that reserve now has turned into a blessing.

Now that the permits have come through and the wine can flow, sales will allow the business to make up for money lost from its farming and fruit-selling operations because of the storms.

While most farmers in the area suffered more damaging losses, the Schneblys say they're lucky because they have a diversified business -- and the wine sector is finally taking off.

They recently hired a distributor -- Miami-based Southern Wine and Spirits -- and 60 American retailers will be selling their wine this year, Schnebly said.

The product soon will be sold internationally, too. They hired a wine broker in Europe who will be marketing heavily in Asia, where tropical fruit wine is already popular, Schnebly said.

He's expecting the litchi wine to sell well, especially in China, where it is referred to as "the king of fruit."

Closer to home, the Schneblys are unveiling their "Islamorada Wine" made from carambola. Schnebly said it's aged in French oak for five months and is somewhat similar to a chardonnay. It's expected to sell for about \$15 a bottle.

And in Islamorada, the Cheeca Lodge & Spa will soon be offering Schnebly Winery wines to its guests, he said.

Three years ago, looking for a way to use over-ripe tropical fruit that couldn't be sold, the Schneblys started experimenting with making wine.

They dreamed of creating a wine-growing region similar to California's Napa Valley or the Finger Lakes region in upstate New York.

But the key difference between those regions and South Miami-Dade is that Schnebly wines are made not from grapes, but from tropical fruit like carambola, litchi, guava, passion fruit and mango.

The Schneblys have been selling tropical fruits and vegetables in Homestead since the early 1990s. They purchased 96 acres of farmland and leased 150 more where they now grow some of the fruit they sell.

They also own a 20-acre parcel in the Redland where they run their Fresh King packing and marketing operations, which also sell imported fruits. That's where the winery is located, at 30205 SW 217th Ave. -- and where about 150 visitors now drop by every day for wine tastings.

When the Schneblys embarked on the wine venture, they didn't realize the legal obstacles they would face.

They learned that Miami-Dade County law didn't allow wine-making in an agricultural zone.

They lobbied for change, and after a year of negotiations won. The law now requires winery operators to cultivate vineyards on at least 10 acres of farmland and limits production to 250,000 gallons a year -- well more than the Schneblys produce.

The couple also had to make structural changes to their property to get permits to allow retail sales on their Redland property.

That set them back months and thousands of dollars, but by late last year they were in business only to be set back by the hurricanes.

Only seven percent of the fruit they sell comes from their own farm.

The rest comes from other local farmers and imported fruit from South and Central America.

Their website is www.schneblywinery.com.