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## Couple pushes agrotourism with wine made from tropical fruit

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HOMESTEAD, Fla. --

When most people plan a trip to South Florida, they imagine world-class beaches, international fashion designers and hot Latin sounds.

But one couple is using wine made from tropical fruit to lure visitors away from the beach to experience other aspects of South Florida's natural beauty.

Instead of using grapes, Peter and Denisse Schnebly are embracing Florida's agricultural strengths by making wine from fruits such as carambola and lychee that won't grow in cooler climates.

"Does it really matter what you made the wine from?" Peter said. "Isn't it more important that you made a good wine?"

The Schneblys started selling their wine in 2005 to cut the waste from their tropical fruit orchards. The couple farms about 100 acres in the Redland area west of Homestead. They got the idea to make wine a few years earlier from one of Peter's friends who owned a winery in upstate New York.

Peter said 20 to 40 percent of a crop can't be sold because it's either blemished or too ripe. The Schneblys began their winery with the fruit they would have thrown away but eventually expanded to buying fruit from neighboring farms.

"We had growers that were dumping this stuff away, and now we're making wine out of that," Denisse said. "And we're paying them for it."

The Schneblys started Fresh King Inc. about 13 years ago, shortly after they were married. They had met in South Florida when Denisse - who is from Colombia - was working as a sales representative for a produce company and Peter - who is from New York - was working as a buyer for a grocery chain. With so many years of experience between them, they decided to start their own company.

The Schneblys make their wine in a relatively small section of their 24,000-square-foot packing facility. The stainless steel fermenting tanks at the winery can hold 20,000 gallons. But because the Schneblys use different fruits with different growing seasons, they can produce more than 100,000 gallons of wine annually.

The Schneblys weren't the first ones to start using tropical fruit for wine. Florida Orange Groves Inc. and Winery in St. Petersburg has been at it for more than a decade. Florida Orange Groves makes wine from mango, guava and passion fruit, which are also on Schneblys' menu.

The Schneblys' wine has already met with success compared with other non-grape wines, pulling in several awards. But the couple hopes to break down the stigma that non-grape wines are somehow inferior.

"We're not making any cheap wine," Denisse said. "We're making serious table wines that can be paired with food. And believe me, they will make food taste better."

Allen Susser, head chef and proprietor of Chef Allen's in Miami, agreed that the Schneblys are making more than a novelty wine. Besides selling the Schneblys' mango and passion fruit wines at his restaurant, Susser said he also likes to cook with it.

"It goes well with our food," Susser said. "We have a lot of tropical food, fresh fish."

Susser even provided the winery with a list of entrees to go with the different wines.

The Schneblys are now working to make the winery itself a destination for visitors.

The couple built a series of 18-foot-tall waterfalls that pour into a 120-foot-long pool last year. The entire structure is made of coral rock, which is found throughout the Redland area. They also recently finished a massive tiki hut to shade visitors from the sun.

The Schneblys are still working to complete a 5,000-square-foot building that will serve as a new visitor's center and tasting room. The building should be finished by June, Peter said, with a courtyard and additional landscaping to be done by September. Once finished, the Schneblys hope to use the space to host weddings, receptions and other events.

Besides trying to market their own winery, the Schneblys also hope to bring agrotourism to the area. Situated between the Everglades and Biscayne National Park, the couple thinks the Redland area is a perfect destination for tourists who want to get away from the beach for a day.

"The wine is just the sexiness on top of the whole thing," Peter said. "We draw more attention because we're a winery. If we were a pig farm nobody would care."

Schnebly Redland's Winery has joined with nine other local attractions to entice potential visitors with more than one destination. Attractions on the Historic Redland Tropical Trail include an alligator farm, Monkey Jungle, a bonsai garden and the Coral Castle, a historic home made with stone.

Miami-Dade County Commissioner Dennis Moss, whose district includes the Redland area, sees agrotourism as a way to help growers resist pressure from developers.

"People will continue to keep agricultural land for agriculture as long as it remains profitable," Moss said.

The fact that the Schneblys can cut farm waste with the winery is a good step in keeping local farms prosperous, Moss said. He hopes the relatively new self-guided tour will develop into a guided tour, where groups on buses visit the different attractions. Moss said this could eventually lead to bed and breakfasts, farmers markets and other retail opportunities.

"I think it's eventually going to blossom into a very exciting tour for people who are coming into the area and something that's going to be lucrative for the farmers out there," Moss said.

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