

A Homegrown Enterprise

North Branch Vineyards Blends Passion With Purpose

by Marsba Barber

John McCann worked for corporate giant Boeing as an aerospace engineer in northern California. When he decided to move back with his family to his home state of Vermont, he got a job at Timken Aerospace in Lebanon, New Hampshire, making the long round-trip drive from his home in Montpelier for several years. Finally, as he puts it, "I got tired of the corporate world and decided to pursue my passion." That passion is winemaking. With his wife, Kate, a teacher at U-32, and two small daughters, Kasi, 6, and Nora, 1, John runs a truly homegrown operation that produces a sophisticated product: North Branch Vineyards.

The only initial giveaway that one is approaching a winery is the large oak barrel that sits on the porch of the homey yellow house. John comes out to greet me and Bridge staffer Carolyn Grodinsky with the small, sleeping Nora across his shoulder, just back from a drive that has lulled the toddler, suffering from a cold, into a much-needed nap. He has stayed home from the grape fields today to care for Nora while friends Chris Alberti, who owns East Warren Vineyard, a five-year-old vineyard that has just produced its first harvest, and Ed Guilfooy, of Hunting River Winery, are out picking mid-season harvest grapes that John will bottle under the North Branch label.

"The great thing about doing this in Vermont, unlike someplace like the Napa Valley, is that all the winemakers are close up here. We share equipment and help each other out," John says. "Today I needed to stay home with Nora so these two guys from other vineyards are out picking grapes for us." North Branch's organic grapes are grown in fields in East Warren, Hunting River and Weathersfield.

After putting Nora to bed, John shows us around the winery—a.k.a. his home—the big smile that he greeted us with never leaving his face. There's no doubt about John's passion for his craft.

The equipment used for the initial preparation of the fresh grapes are kept in the McCanns' garage. "When harvest season is over, we put the cats back in here," he explains. First, there's the crusher/de-stemmer, a large steel device with an auger-like tool in the center that splits the grapes open and takes out the stems. Then there's a large bin that,



John McCann and daughter Nora. Photo courtesy of North Branch Winery.

as Carolyn points out, looks deceptively like a hot tub. This is the fermenting bin where red grapes, like the ones that are being picked today, sit for four to five days to ferment and enhance color.

John guides us to another corner of the garage where the grape press sits. This is a large rounded piece of equipment lined with a rubberized "bladder." The press strains the juice, separating out the seeds and stems. Then, with a series of tubing and pumps, the

fermented juice is pumped to large stainless steel tanks that sit like sentries in the McCann's large basement. "This basement was meant to hold a big family room," says John. "We never dreamed it would be holding all these tanks and wine barrels." As it turns out, the space is large enough and then some to hold all the winemaking equipment.

Walking past scattered toys and other comforting signs of an active, happy family, we head down the stairs to the basement. As

we approach the large steel barrels where red wine is fermenting, John tells us, as if asking us to hold a delicate seashell to our ear to hear the ocean, "Put your ear against the barrel. You can hear the wine fermenting." Sure enough, with an ear against the steel, a dark bubbling sound emanates.

Before the wine gets to this stage of fermentation, it goes in these same steel barrels to the cold stabilization room to take out the high acidity of the grapes. The temperature is dropped to 27 degrees for two weeks to three months, depending on the variety of wine, then is aged at room temperature for another six to nine months. Using the pump system again, the wine is transferred to oak barrels and sits for another year. (White wines undergo a shorter process.) One more step happens before bottling: the wine is filtered through plate filters that strain out any sediment that's left. Then, using a four-spout bottling machine, the wine is bottled, labeled and ready to go.

Before we leave, John scrounges around the basement looking for something. "Where's my wine thief?" he asks himself. What? A "wine thief" is a slender glass wand that can be used to tap into the barrels and "steal" a bit of wine into a glass. He climbs near the top of the barrels with a mischievous smile and does just that.

One perk of the family business that the McCanns' daughters get to share: the fresher-than-fresh organic grape juice that John always saves out before fermenting. "The girls love it," he says.

North Branch Vineyards self-distributes wine at the Hunger Mountain Coop, at the Capital City Farmers Market and at five different festivals. J. Morgan's Restaurant also serves and sponsors their wine. Business is good, as evidenced by the stock room where boxes of bottled wine are dwindling. "Boxes were floor to ceiling in here in March of last year's harvest," John points out.

Whatever the profit margin, though, John has his own reasons for this homegrown enterprise. "I don't do it for the money," he says. "I do it for the passion."

North Branch Vineyards is located at 82 Trillium Road, near the banks of the North Branch River, in Montpelier. The winery will open a tasting room and retail store on the premises this winter. Call 229-6169 for more information.