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## **Couple cultivates vineyard**

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February 16, 2011

Drinking good wine is poetry.

Making good wine, hallowed...

Fountain Hills residents Curt Dunham and Peggy Fiandaca wax poetic and reverentially about all things wine.

They own and operate Lawrence Dunham Vineyards in southern Arizona. Curt is the winemaker. While they are passionate about their wine business, it is relatively new to their lives.

While their story is neat as a pin, their journey is circuitous, starting with a business partnership that started almost 20 years ago and continuing through their marriage and into the world of winemaking.

Dunham and Fiandaca are strategic planners. They have worked in communities all over the world, and they have been able to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

“We have been to wine regions all around the world,” Curt said. “We have always been interested in wine.”

While they enjoyed tasting and learning about wine, their interests gravitated to the magic of the grape.

“In our travels, our time often was spent with the winemakers, learning how wines are made,” Curt said.

“Every wine, every region is unique. And what a winemaker does with the grape is magical.” The couple did not have plans to own a winery. Curt grew up around farming, but obviously cotton and grapes are not similar.

The couple used their acquired knowledge about wines to feed their oenological passion. A few years ago, they began exploring Arizona wines. They had friends in southeastern Arizona who were making wine.

Keeling Schaefer Vineyards in Cochise County, and now the winery nearest Lawrence Dunham, were producing wines “that just blew me away,” Curt said.

Curt and Peggy became interested in buying property in southeastern Arizona and began looking in earnest in 2007. They stumbled across a 40-acre parcel with a house and an industrial building.

They spent time testing the soil and the water, making sure it was appropriate for their plan to start a vineyard. They drew up a business plan, checking with their attorney on the details.

Curt took the plan to their corporate agent in Fountain Hills. When the lawyer learned what was planned, he was astonished.

But no more so than Curt and Peggy when they discovered that the attorney had spent the first 20 years of his career setting up wine corporations in northern California.

“It couldn’t have worked out better than to have someone so knowledgeable about the business of wineries,” Curt said.

Within five months, Lawrence Dunham was a working vineyard. Grapes were planted in April 2008, but not before conditions were determined to be right.

“It is unusual to go so rapidly,” Peggy said. “But we were ready with everything the first year.” The most important element of the process, Curt said, is that the root stock matches the soil. As the winemaker, he chose two root stocks genetically created for the hotter, drier climates in California, serving as a near match for the climate in southeastern Arizona.

The grapes growing and harvested at Lawrence Dunham are Rhone varietals, selected because they do well in the volcanic soils in Cochise County in Arizona.

The Rhone Valley in France is known for its Petite Sirah, Syrah, Grenache and Viognier. Those are the grapes growing at Lawrence Dunham.

The winery has released a 2008 Syrah, a 2009 Grenache and what is a variation of the Grenache called Sky Island, also released in 2009.

They also have just bottled a blend they are calling R.E.D., Curt’s father’s initials and the namesake of the winery.

The blend, made from 59 percent Grenache, 21 percent Petite Sirah and 20 percent Mourvedre, will be ready to drink in 60 to 90 days.

The special bottling is in honor of Curt’s parents, who both died last year. They named it R.E.D., for Robert Ervin Dunham, as well as Curt’s mother, Betty, whose maiden name was Lawrence. She, along with Peggy, went by the nickname “Red.”

“We’re looking forward to that release,” Curt said. “It’s a sentimental wine.”

Sky Island smacks of sentiment as well. It is an area in the Chiricahua Mountains, so called because the peaks appear as islands in the sky when viewed from above. The region covers southwestern New Mexico, southeastern Arizona and northern Sonora in Mexico.

The Sky Island wines showcase grapes grown on the mountain.

The Lawrence Dunham Sky Island Grenache is aged in neutral oak barrels.

The point to that is to “let the grape do its thing,” Curt said. “Conditions are unique, and we want the wine to reflect that. By using neutral oak barrels, you taste the grape without influence from the barrel.”

Wine is influenced in its production by a number of factors, including the medium in which it is aged. Lawrence Dunham ages its other wines in French or American oak barrels, delivering different nuances to the finished product.

Lawrence Dunham will never be a huge producer, Peggy said: “We are a boutique, family winery. That is what we have planned all along.”

The projected number of cases to finally be produced will be between 2,500 and 3,000 annually. “This small production gives us flavor profiles not available to big growers and producers,” Curt said. “We are interested in these unique wines, and having a hands-on relationship with the grape.”

Curt and Peggy also want to maintain their interaction with their customers. “This one-on-one interaction is so much a part of the whole experience,” Peggy said. “Our philosophy is to stay small and know who drinks our wine.”

Both businesses owned by the couple appear to be high stress, but Curt and Peggy each expressed their enjoyment of both businesses.

Curt said he blows off steam in the field.

“It’s therapeutic,” he said. “I can be outside enjoying the weather, work on the plants, doing things that allow me to relax.”

Peggy said the experience they have in their consulting business has provided a good foundation for dealing with the ups and downs of the wine enterprise.

“Both businesses are creative, so we are using positive energy even under stressful conditions,” she said. “We are comfortable in our capabilities, and enjoy what we do a lot.”

Curt added that the satisfaction they feel at the end of their day, whether they have worked in the vineyards or in the office, is they have done what they love.

Peggy said they have a strong vision of where they want to be with the winery. Regardless of the path their day takes, the vision is never lost.

“The vision is to produce quality wines that are reflective of our unique region,” she said.

“Knowing that our wines are appearing on people’s dinner tables is confirmation that we are fulfilling the vision.”

As the wine business matures, Curt and Peggy will begin a stronger marketing campaign. Case quantity creates challenges in their marketing strategy, but they are beginning to do more events to introduce the wines to more and more people.

They have done a number of events in Fountain Hills at their home. They recently had members of the Tucson and Bisbee tourism bureaus visit the winery for a tasting.

“Everything we are doing now is by appointment and by advance planning,” Peggy said.

“We don’t have a tasting room, so we open our doors to people who are interested in learning more about us.”

They are planning a winemaker dinner at Sunglow Ranch Resort the first weekend in April.

“We think this will be a very exciting partnership,” Peggy said. “Sunglow is a beautiful place, and events there will be a lot of fun.”

Lawrence Dunham also plans to participate in the 2011 Arizona Wine Week events set for later in the year, entering wines in the annual competition. The event is sponsored by The Arizona Republic.

The Arizona Winegrowers Association coordinates the event, which culminates in the Festival at the Farm at South Mountain.

For more information about Lawrence Dunham Vineyards, visit [www.lawrencedunhamvineyards.com](http://www.lawrencedunhamvineyards.com).