



Tony Leaderbrand

Wine Sellers

STORY BY SHAWNDR A MILLER
PHOTOS BY JOSH MARSHALL

When it comes to running a winery, the Leaderbrand family appreciates the value of hard work ... and solar power

Back in 2004, when Indianapolis resident Tony Leaderbrand and his wife and parents acquired the land that was to become Owen Valley Winery, one of the first items on the to-do list was to plant 250 persimmon trees. Tony had the idea that persimmon wine would have a distinctly southern Indiana appeal — a bouquet that would pair perfectly with the vineyard's rural Owen County locale.

Three and a half acres of grapevines planted that same year have yielded many a bottle of wine since then. The Steuben grapes shine in a sweet wine called Valley Blush, the Traminette in the semi-sweet Harvest Moon. And the ensuing years have seen steady growth for the winery operated by Tony and his wife, Jo Anna, along with his parents, Preston and Bonnie Leaderbrand.

But persimmon trees take longer than grapevines to mature. Decades longer.

"I'll probably never see them in production," he says, "because persimmon trees grow really slow. It's a really dense wood, and it takes many years for them to get to an age to produce."

So in the meantime, every fall he places an ad in the paper offering to buy persimmons from local folks. By bucket and shoebox, people from all over the region bring in their fruit, which the winery buys by the pound.

Toward the end of last year's season, one of the elderly women who'd brought him several shoe boxes of persimmons told him: "This is the last you'll see of me. I got enough to replace the tires on my car."

Tony, the son of a coal miner, worked his way up at Roche Diagnostics without benefit of a college degree. He's proud of his blue-collar roots and the values of hard work and thrift modeled by his parents. So the memory of this exchange takes on a special significance. He still gets a charge out of talking about that "little old lady" and her shoe boxes full of native fruit.

"How cool is that?" he says. "There is nothing cooler than that. I had no idea that we would be able to do that for the public. I had no idea that it would mean so, so much."

To the Leaderbrands, keeping money circulating in the local economy is not the icing on the cake. It's practically the whole banquet. Though they do bottle wines from California grapes, roughly 70 percent of the fruit used in their product comes from local sources. (They round out their persimmon needs by buying in quantity from Aleta Crowe, a Green County farmer.)

And it isn't just the wine. They serve Rice's Quality Farm Meats at their tastings, offer locally roasted coffee beans from Dragonfly Farms, and sell Nate's Candy Jar sweets in their shop. From May through October, local musicians are lined up to perform every second Saturday on the deck. And the walls of the tasting room feature a rotating display of artwork from the Owen County Art Guild.

Aleta Crowe says all this magnifies the winery's community impact. "Tony's obviously very locally minded and concerned about being good to the people who are his neighbors and friends and acquaintances," she says.

The impact extends well beyond this one establishment. As the vineyard developed, Tony perceived a gap in local tourism efforts. "I kept getting this vibe that there's no effort around trying to bring everyone together and do this task collectively," he remembers.

So in 2012 he hosted a meeting of area mom-and-pop busi-

nesses to talk about the possibilities. The response was overwhelming: "We just packed the place," he recalls. A hospitality initiative called Tour Owen Valley arose out of that meeting.

Now everyone works together on cross-promotion of Owen County's attractions. Whenever a local business hosts a special event, the restaurants and art guild and small shops are invited to participate. A retiree has begun printing a newsletter called Tour Owen Valley Times that tells the story of the county's heritage, culture and natural beauty.

Spencer resident Angie Lawson says Tony was "pretty fundamental" in drawing the group together. She believes Owen Valley Winery has put the county on the map in the viticultural arena. She's Owen County's chief deputy auditor and first got to know the family when Preston initially came into the auditor's office to discuss plans to build a winery.

About the Leaderbrands, she says, "They're good people, and they really care about the community. Tony doesn't actually live down here but probably spends 95 percent of his time here."

For his part, Tony insists, "It's not about a winery. It's about changing a community. It's been about evolving a community into being more sustainable."

That evolution started with ensuring the business itself was sustainable. The family worked steadily over several years to lay the groundwork for a tourism destination that now is one of the anchors of the local economy.

They took their time and built the business thoughtfully. The two-year search for just the right spot began when Preston and Bonnie came out of early retirement. As Tony tells it, after a lifetime of hard work, they found retirement a bit dull. So they talked to him about starting a new venture, and Tony suggested viticulture, thinking of the California wineries he and Jo Anna had enjoyed touring. Eventually, the Leaderbrands found the pristine piece of land in rural Owen County that they would shape into a vineyard.

Starting in 2004 they began slowly transforming the barn on the property into a production facility and tasting room that draws growing numbers of visitors every year.

The family's work ethic served them well. By doing the work themselves, they were able to avoid taking on any debt. "We own everything a hundred percent," he says.

They further saved money by repurposing salvaged materials in the construction. Much of the structure and framing wood came from a construction company's castoffs. They incorporated French doors from a hospital remodeling. The bar top was made from a piece of oak that Tony's grandfather, a lifelong tinkerer and collector, had kept for some unknown purpose.

Even the bathroom has a story: "I stopped at a church yard sale to purchase a toilet, and all I had was a check to pay," Tony says. "So he asked for both of us to pray for the young men's program at the center (instead of) money. So we did."

At the time he was still at Roche, but every spare moment was spent with his dad, framing, wiring and plumbing the place. "Weekends I'd go down and swing hammers," he remembers. Many of his corporate friends and colleagues helped out, seeming to live vicariously through his dream. His two sons, Connor and



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