



Vine

COUNTRY

Wining and Dining at Jean Farris

By Kathie Stamps | Photos by Matt Goins

Jean Farris Winery & Bistro is owned by two people whose lives — and vines — were destined to intertwine. Jeanie and Ben O'Daniel both come from wine-making families.

In 1990 Ben's father, Eddie O'Daniel, started Springhill Vineyards, which is now part of Springhill Winery & Plantation Bed 'n Breakfast, in Bloomfield, Ky., 20 miles north of Springfield, where Ben was born. Jeanie hails from Seco, Ky., a hamlet near Whitesburg.



Ben and Jeanie O'Daniel
in the vineyards outside their
Jean Farris Winery & Bistro

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When she was 16, Jeanie and her parents, Jack and Sandra Looney, started planting grapevines on the family's Christmas tree farm. The Looneys bought the old SECO coal company store and opened Highland Winery (in dry Letcher County, no less) in 1997. The Looneys' enterprise also includes a restaurant and a bed and breakfast.

The year her parents formed their winery, Jeanie finished her degree in food science at the University of Kentucky and decided to take a college-sponsored bus tour of Missouri wine country. Ben O'Daniel also was on the bus. He had recently

studied archeology at Western Kentucky University. "We spent the week together and that was it," said Jeanie.

They married a year later, moved to Nashville, and started a wine consulting business called Southeast Vintners. While Jeanie was managing retirement plans for ING, a worldwide financial services company, Ben was working with wineries in Tennessee and soon was traveling to Kentucky to Lover's Leap winery in Lawrenceburg and Acres of Land in Richmond. In 2003 the couple moved back to Kentucky. "Our objective was to own our own winery and farm," said Jeanie.

After considering seven different counties for locating their vineyard, the O'Daniels chose Fayette due to its soil conditions, proximity to the river, and Lexington's population base.



(Above) Tracy Willman, left, and Nick Smith enjoy glasses of wine as a beautiful sunset unfolds on the patio at Jean Farris Winery & Bistro; (left) a three-ton German press outside a renovated 80-year-old tobacco barn.

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Their 14-acre farm is five miles out Old Richmond Road. The Jean Farris Bistro is just off the road, with plenty of room on the grounds for weddings or other tent-type events. Just behind the restaurant lie 7½ acres of estate vineyards.

There were two barns when the couple bought the property, one of which, an 80-year-old former tobacco barn, was in fairly good condition. It was turned into the wine-making building. They razed the other and in its footprint built the bistro. “We wanted the building to fit into the landscape and look familiar, not like a French chateau in the country,” said Ben. “What we built accented the landscape.”

When the O’Daniels planted their first grapes in February 2004 — “I’m self-taught,” Ben said of his vintner skills — the novice winemakers stepped closer to realizing their dream of operating a winery.

The name Jean Farris comes from the first part of Jeanie’s name and Ben’s middle name. “Everybody wants to meet Jean Farris,” said Ben. This past spring a woman from Tennessee, whose name was Jean Farris, came in. “She thinks we named it after her,” said Ben with a laugh.

The Marito, a dry white, was one of the first wines bottled at the farm. “We had made a wine for my sister’s wedding and called it wedding wine,” said Ben. “When we were putting labels together and looking for what to call it, we took the Latin word for wedding and called it Marito. It became our signature wine.”

The Tempest, a blend of Tempranillo, cabernet sauvignon, and cabernet franc, is another favorite of Jean Farris’ patrons. “It’s unique from the standpoint of flavor,” said Ben. “There’s spice and a hint of tobacco and cedar on top of a dark currant fruit. We released it, and it went to the nation’s largest competition and won a double gold medal and best of class.” There were 3,800 entries from 84 countries at the international competition, held last summer at the Indianapolis State Fair. It was the first time a Kentucky wine had won an award at the competition. “It sold out around Christmas,” Ben added. The 2006 vintage will be bottled next October.

Making wine requires special tools and equipment. In the yard between the bistro and the wine-making barn is a three-ton press from Germany. Inside the barn are fermentation tanks for the reds and whites, and oak barrels for aging. Most of the barrels, about 70 percent, are French oak, shipped in from the Burgundy region of France. The remaining 30 percent are American oak barrels from East Bernstadt Cooperage, just



Jeff Wheeler, left, and Patsy Mitchell discuss wines with John Liebertz during a tasting.

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outside London, Ky.

"Cabernet grown in Kentucky doesn't have a mid-palate," said Ben, referring to a term for how a wine's texture feels in the mouth. "That American white oak barrel helps build the mid-palate."

The rich and luscious depth is what most people like about California wines. Kentucky grapes produce wines more similar in texture to French wines, but the O'Daniels' method of aging cabernet sauvignon in American white oak barrels makes it thicker, more like a California wine.

"It builds character on your tongue from the first sip," added Jeanie, "and continues to flourish in your mouth and get richer, the way chocolate does."

Jean Farris produced 10,000 gallons of wine last year and will have 14,000 gallons this year, or 4,000 cases. It takes 2.38 pounds of grapes to make a bottle of wine.

A unique twist to their business model is that the O'Daniels use other farms as venues to grow their grapes. Several nearby landowners want the beauty of a vineyard but are not inclined to tend it day in and day out. The O'Daniels provide the labor and knowledge. "We plant vines on their property and tend the vines," said Jeanie. "Then we buy the fruit from them."

"Wines are never better than the grapes," said Ben. "It's taken me 20 years to begin to understand how that happens."

This past July the winery released three wines, including the first Jean Farris estate wine, the Viognier. The first grape varietal of its kind planted in Kentucky, the Viognier is a traditional Rhone variety known for its bright fruit and long finish. The 2006 Jean Farris Pinot Gris is a fragrant wine with mildly floral and lemon-citrus flavors. Summer also saw a release of



Grapevines frame the entrance to the bistro; (below) bistro fare might include a bone in pork chop with a blackberry and mustard Bordelaise sauce and stuffed tomato.

116 cases of petite syrah, a red wine with a dark berry fruit and blueberry nose, purple-black in color.

Because wine and food go so well together, the O'Daniels knew from the beginning they wanted to open a restaurant. Early in their marriage the couple had toured several wineries and the ones they enjoyed most always had food paired with the wine tastings. "When you taste a wine, you want to know how it works with food," said Jeanie. But this was an idea more readily conceived than executed.

It took almost three years to get their property zoned to serve food. At first, the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government didn't consider food an "accessory business use for a winery."

The couple appealed the government's decision and took their issue to the board of adjustment, whose citizen panel agreed with the O'Daniels. Their deed was amended, and the restaurant is now zoned in compliance with local ordinances.

"It brings more opportunity to this agriculture environment," said Ben. "The zoning helps promote (area) wines."

After planting grapes in 2004 and going through the harvest and aging process, the couple sold their first glass of wine in

June 2006. Last Oct. 18 they opened the Jean Farris Wine & Bistro to the public.

"We decided to build a place we wanted to go for dinner," said Ben. "We had no idea it would become what it is."

What it has become is a very popular place for lunch and dinner. Patrons spend an average of three or four hours at dinner. "We book our tables only once," said Jeanie, adding that patrons are "here for the rest of the night."

"Most Fridays and Saturdays are booked," said Ben. "On Saturday we usually try to keep a couple of tables available for walk-ins here and there."

The restaurant seats 60 inside while the patio can seat 50. "We thought it would be a more romantic spot, but it's turned out to be parties of friends," Jeanie said of the patio.

The atmosphere of the bistro is sophisticated, set off by white tablecloths and dark brown wooden chairs. No bright lights or garish neon signs here. A touch of character (an acid-etched copper bar top) and a lovely dose of culture (art and sculpture on the walls by the late artist John Regis Tuska) go

Wine-making timetable



Harvest takes place from August to mid-October, during which time the grapes are picked, crushed, and pressed. Fermentation is the next step, followed by the clarification process, where Ben O'Daniel develops the flavor profiles. Aging takes months or years, depending on the particular wine. The vintage date on the bottle refers to the date the grapes were grown. "Our cabernet sauvignon is aged two years," said Ben. "The '06 will come out in the early spring of 2008."

Jean Farris Wines

Cabernet Sauvignon
Chardonnay
Dolce: sweet white, blush, and red
Marito: dry red and dry white
Merlot

Petite Syrah
Pinot Gris
Rosé
Tempest
Viognier



Winery tasting salon and sales bar hours

Monday-Friday 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.
Saturday 10:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m.

Bistro hours

Lunch: Monday-Friday 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.
Dinner: Monday-Thursday 4:30 p.m. to 9 p.m.
Friday-Saturday 5:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.
Saturday brunch: 10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

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with the fabulous food and wines.

Ben thinks the proper setting for wine is an important part of enjoying a meal. "Alcohol has had a bad reputation in the United States. It's been misunderstood and misused," he said. "We wanted to add a restaurant to bring it into the right cultural perspective."

Executive chef Justin Thompson, a native Lexingtonian, started at Jean Farris as a part-time cook and was soon promoted to executive chef. He previously had worked at Holly Hill and the Black Tulip restaurants in Midway, Ky., and at the Signature Club in Lexington.

"We keep it themed," Thompson said of the menu. "It's French with a regional twist." The menu changes every six weeks and is written with wines in mind first. "Every dish on our menu takes wine into consideration," he added.

Diners can start with an appetizer of cast-iron crab cake, caramelized onion tart, carpaccio, or ceviché. There are several salads, such as the limestone bibb, baby spinach, and Caesar. Entrées feature a pasta of the day, grilled ahi tuna, seared salmon, pan-roasted monkfish, magret de canard, marchand de vin, and pork rack. For dessert there are crème brûlée, bread pudding, lemon mousse, and phyllo-wrapped flambé bananas. The kids' menu includes ravioli, hot dogs, mac 'n cheese, and grilled cheese.

The restaurant uses as much local produce as possible. A small herb garden is located right behind the building. Because the kitchen is small and has limited refrigerator space, meats and produce are ordered and prepared on a daily basis.

Wine recommendations used to be listed on the menu, but that soon changed so the wait staff could discuss wines with the guests. Wines are meant to be put on the table and enjoyed with food, according to Ben. "Wines heighten the experience of a meal," he said. "Wine and food complement each other."

The O'Daniels eschew the old rule of drinking red wine with meat and white wine with fish.

"Have what you like with a meal," said Ben. "Enjoy what you're drinking. If you don't like dry wine, don't drink it."

Twilla Parr and Tom Robbins are members of the Jean Farris wine club who are pleased to support this local winery. Membership in the wine club includes automatic shipments of wine on a monthly or quarterly basis, discount prices on all wines, VIP tastings, and barrel samples at the winery.

"The staff is always pleasant and courteous," said Robbins.

"The food is wonderful," added Parr.

High praise, indeed. But the O'Daniels don't think of themselves as having a corner on the market. They want more vintners to join them in Fayette County. "I'd love to see eight of them on Old Richmond Road," said Ben. "The more wineries there are, the more people visit."

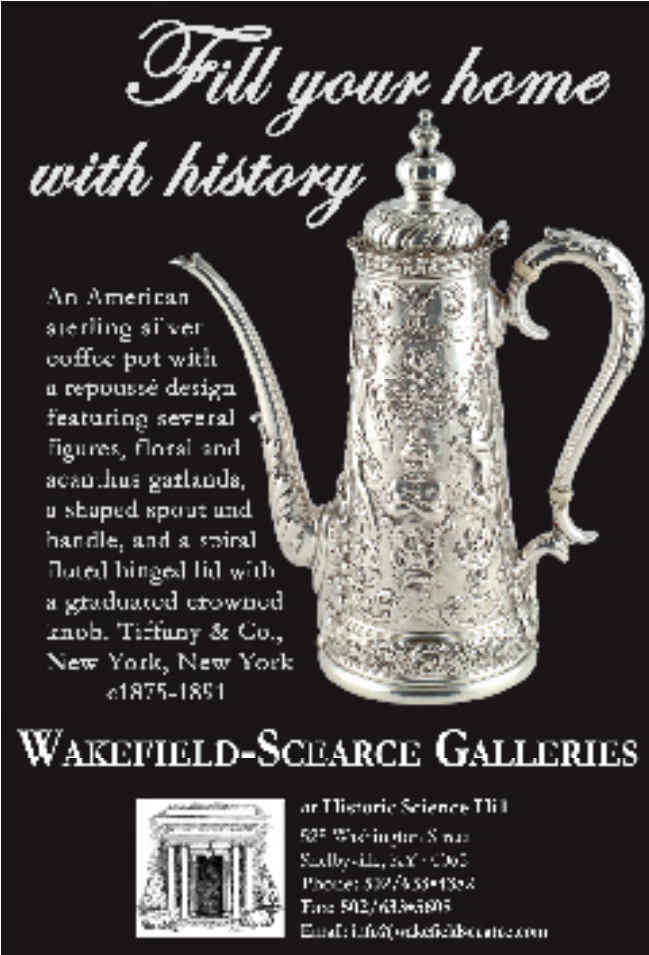
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