

**Ask SCORE for Business Advice**

**“Ask SCORE” Column  
Green Bay Press Gazette: November 4, 2010**

**Winery arises from fun hobby by Tina Dettman-Bielefeldt**

Tim Abel was working full time when the entrepreneurial spirit struck. He enjoyed his jobs in marketing and finance but felt drawn to a different life.

"One day, about 17 years ago, I woke up and thought, 'I want to grow grapes and make wine.' I don't know what even spurred this interest, but there it was," Abel said.

With the support of his wife, Sara, and three daughters, he began the process of learning everything he could about growing grapes. The University of Minnesota has a viticulture program where they breed grapes, and Abel studied their results. He joined the Minnesota Grape Growers Association and became a board member. He attended conferences and workshops that taught him which grapes grow in a cold climate.

"The more I looked into this, the more I started to feel like I could actually do it," he said.

With Abel still at his job, the long hours began. In 1997, he planted a half-acre test site with eight different varieties of grapes. Because it takes two years for the wine to be ready, selecting the best grapes is a slow process.

He studied wineries located in cooler climates and began to refine his plan. Finding an ideal site took another few years, and in 1999, he and his wife decided to purchase property at the foot of the Niagara Escarpment near Greenleaf. The property is called The Ledge, and with its cereal bowl shape, provides needed drainage for the grapes. An added plus is that the Fox River Trail runs right through the middle of the property.

The Abels constructed a building to store equipment, but soon decided to convert it to a winery where they could have a tasting room and store.

"We looked at this as a family project. All of our vacations and weekends consisted of doing something for the business. The kids have been here since they were small (they are now 15, 10, and 6) and seem to enjoy it," Abel said.

In 2006, Abel had his first commercial harvest and then opened the winery a few years later. He started to feel like the winery was going to work and left his full-time job. "The first year was weird," Abel recalled. "We opened up and wondered if anyone would show up, and people just came — this year is double what we sold last year."

Along the way, he continues to tweak his business plan. LedgeStone Vineyards ([www.ledgestonevineyards.com](http://www.ledgestonevineyards.com)) now bottles wines under the names LedgeStone and Monarch Creek. There are currently 15 acres of grapes growing in the vineyard with about 8,000 vines. They sell direct to the consumer from the winery that also has a coffee shop. Future plans call for wine clubs and placement in upscale restaurants.

"The business blurs the lines between work, play and family time," Abel said. "I wanted to come up with a second career that was something I liked to do and it just came together."

Tina Dettman-Bielefeldt is co-owner of DB Commercial Real Estate in Green Bay and assistant district director for SCORE, Wisconsin.