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Hogen brothers on a vineyard venture

By **Mike Schoemer**, West Fargo Pioneer

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About 30 minutes east of West Fargo, Steve and Rodney Hogen grew up on the prairie near Buffalo. There, on the Hogen family farm, they were told about the old Red Trail, a passageway for pioneers who headed west through North Dakota into the eastern hills of Montana.

The trail, quite literally ran through their backyard.

Neighbors would tell of old arrowheads found near the trail, and other relics left behind by those who trotted toward a new frontier.

Today, it is the Hogens themselves who are blazing toward a new frontier, with the first vineyard in southeastern North Dakota. When looking for a name for the new enterprise, Red Trail Vineyard was a natural fit.

"It was a very important trail to people at the time," Rodney said. "It just seemed like a natural fit."

The process started in February in 2003, when Maple River Winery owner Greg Kempel made a presentation to eastern Cass County farmers, requesting a few adventurous landowners to try growing grapes in the fertile soil here. The reaction from many was the same sentiment voiced by Rodney Hogen.



"I thought, 'Who the heck is going to try to grow grapes in North Dakota?'" he said. "A lot of the people who went to the meeting just went the meeting hoping we'd get a sample. But the more I listened, the more it made sense."

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Intrigued, Rodney pitched the idea to his brother, Steve, who lives with his wife in West Fargo. Steve, who works Monday through Thursday at Navteq in Fargo, drove out to the old homestead where Rodney now farms one weekend, and the two selected a plot of land no larger than a few acres on a

hillside where they would start their venture. Bordered on the south and west by Buffalo Creek, the trellises, fence posts and wire offers a different vista than the many wheat and bean fields that surround it.

"I headed into Fargo and picked up some vines at Baker Nursery there, then a little place in Minnesota called Lake City Nursery had some more, and that first spring we planted two varieties and about 120 vines," Rodney said. "It's a little harder to find vines in the spring because most of the ordering is done in the fall."

It is that crop that will create the first bottle of Red Trail Vineyard wine, to be grown and picked here at the vineyard, then processed by Kempel in nearby Casselton at Maple River Winery. But the fact is, with wine, you're not sure what you're going to get until poured out into that first glass.

"It's really a delicate, experimental thing," Steve said. "You could be growing the same kind of variety here that they are growing 20 miles away, but because of the weather patterns, because of the soil, because of the moisture, the two wines could taste totally different. We just don't know yet."

The French call that terrior. It can vary so much that, as Rodney has witnessed, a glass made from grapes at one end of a row of vines can taste totally different from a glass created from grapes grown at the other end of a row. Though grown less than a mile apart, the fruit is that sensitive to the conditions around it.

Bold wines have been developed about 130 miles from here in Alexandria, Minn., at Carlos Creek Winery. In Minot, a winery called Pointe of View has begun growing its own grapes, after importing them from southeastern Minnesota.

A lot of the cold climate varieties used were developed by University of Minnesota horticulturalist Elmer Swensen, who died recently at the age of 93. Though most of Swensen's work on campus revolved around cash crops, his passion for winemaking helped him develop several varieties of grapes that could survive the hard winters of the northern plains.

"Thanks to him, we have 11 different varieties of grapes that we grow here now, and about 800 vines," Rodney said. "We'd like to eventually have a vineyard of about 3,000 vines. We're just still in that experimental phase where we're

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finding out which of these varieties is going to survive; which variety makes the best wine; and where to go from there.”

With the vineyard established in early 2003, the Hogen brothers actually produced their first grapes in 2004. Last fall, they tested those grapes, mostly of the Frontenac and King of the North varieties, for sugar content and acidity. This year, those plants will produce enough grapes to process.

“It’s a process that takes about three years,” Rodney said. “A lot of people don’t actually realize the amount of time that goes into it. You have to let the vines develop for the first three years, really. The first year, you cut them back to practically nothing in the fall so they develop a good trunk. The second year, you might get some grapes, but not nearly enough for a batch. But by the third year, if you have a good season and the animals leave you alone, you might have something.”

As for the animals, the Hogens and their families have taken a few steps to try to keep predators away from the precious plants. They have constructed a large fence around the vineyard to keep deer away, while growing tubes around younger plants prevent jackrabbits from nibbling away at the shoots.

“Actually, we let the rabbits do the pruning work in the first two years,” Steve said. “But now, we need them to leave the plants alone.”

Another venture occurred in the fall of last year, when the brothers purchased an old granary that, appropriately enough, sat right on the old Red Trail. They moved it from its old home about a mile southeast of Casselton to their plot on Cass County Highway No. 3, and began to remodel the entire building. The structure now accommodates a couple of offices and a beautiful tasting room. They also build a front porch onto the structure where patrons can sit outside and enjoy a glass of wine.

“We had a lot of family members, retired farmers, pretty much anyone we could find help out with this,” Steve said. “My wife, Marla, did a lot of the decorating. It’s come a long way.”

The Hogens still get some funny looks from passers by while working out in their vineyard, which is currently just north of the granary, but will expand to a field south of the old building soon, Rodney said. However, most have been very excited once they find out a vineyard has sprung up nearby. And North Dakota State University’s horticulture department has come along on the adventure, using a small portion of the Hogens’ plot to grow their own grapes.

“We think it’s something that could really take off,” Rodney said. “It’s not that hard to imagine. Wine is a very popular thing right now.”

Thanks to movies like “Sideways” and the classic art of winemaking, neither brother thinks that popularity will fade. Rather, like the wine they’re producing, it

will continue to get better as the years go by.

Red Trail Vineyard is open for tours every weekend throughout the growing season. Hours are 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. on Saturday, and 1-7 p.m. on Sunday. For more information, visit their Web site (constructed by Steve) at www.redtrailvineyard.com, or call (701) 633-5392.

Photo caption: The two brothers welcome wine lovers to their tasting room, constructed inside a former granary. (David Samson)

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