

August Hill Winery Success Story

Mark Wenzel looked out over the scenic farmland and remembered his grandfather, Augie's, love—his passion—for the land. August Engelhaupt had toiled on this plot of ground on the bluffs of the Illinois River with a humbleness that drew the respect of everyone who knew him. As he gazed at his grandpa's farm, Mark felt that same passion which had driven his grandfather and it re-ignited Mark's desire to work the ground. Mark had just become the guardian of his grandpa's farm and he knew he needed to get in touch with his buddy Sean Ginocchio. The two of them have been friends since grade school and Mark "knew it was time for him and Sean to launch their next great adventure." Mark also talked it over with his wife, Teri, and beginning in 2000, along with Sean, they founded August Hill Winery.

Mark had grown up in a farming family and then headed for college where he received a degree in engineering. He had been working at Caterpillar for a number of years but was looking for a way to get back into farming on at least a part-time basis. Sean also went to college to receive a degree in marketing and ended up in the title insurance business, but he, too, was looking for a new challenge.

They had plenty of land to grow grapes and a desire to begin "a company with a passion for creation." Between Mark's engineering knowledge—along with his childhood farming experience—and Sean's marketing knowledge, they decided to create a vineyard and winery. Mark had dabbled with winemaking over the years and Sean's wife, Tara, grew up in California's Napa Valley wine country so they decided to combine their knowledge and experience and go for it by creating a vineyard and winery. The first grapes were planted by hand in 2003 on less than three acres. It was definitely a family affair with everyone lending a hand to help plant the vines. Mark feels that if Augie were alive to see the success of the vineyard and the winery he would be exceedingly proud of what Mark, Teri and Sean have created, but because of his humbleness, Augie would undoubtedly say, "you would never be able to sell a bottle of wine with my name on it—no one would buy it." The truth of the matter is that August Hill Winery is selling a *lot* of bottles of wine—and each and every one has Augie's name proudly printed on the label. If you look closely at the August Hill logo, you'll see a bit of Augie, as the "A" comes from his personal signature.

As when starting any business, it seems as though there are a thousand things that need to be done—sometimes all at the same time. Because of Mark's engineering and farming experience, he and Teri tackled the production side of the business, while Sean and Tara teamed up on the marketing side of things. Sean and Tara were instrumental in the initial stages with marketing, branding and promoting the new enterprise. In fact, the first matching grant that August Hill Winery received from the Northwest Region Entrepreneurship Center in 2005 for \$5,000 was used for branding, designing labels and a website. Much of Tara's artistic influence can be seen in the label design and the décor of the tasting room.

The payroll of the winery has grown almost as fast as the grape vines. Currently, August Hill employs 15 employees, some full-time, some part-time. Mark is proud of the fact that all of the jobs that have been created at the winery are "new hours. It's gratifying to know we've started a business in which the jobs are *new hours*, we're not just stealing the jobs from someone else; from another business." The rapid success of the winery was a key factor in receiving another matching grant from the Northwest Region Entrepreneurship Center for \$5,000 in

2008 to implement a wine club. The club is a way to add a core of loyal, repeat customers by inviting them special wine tastings, various seasonal events during the year and offering unique wine packages. A person was hired to coordinate the new wine club with the goal of increasing the membership of the club to 200 people by the end of 2009. This has also met with great success; the total membership consists of 160 people as of March 2009.

The success of August Hill hasn't slowed down plans for the future. Although Sean's title insurance business is thriving, and he is no longer involved in the daily operations of the winery, he and his family continue to support August Hill Winery with corporate sales and special events. A new tangent of the winery that Mark and Teri would love to implement would be to begin production of sparkling wines—a first for Illinois vintners—but they realize that this would be a major step forward. The production methods for sparkling wines differ substantially from standard wines. New equipment must be purchased, more land must be cultivated, additional vines must be planted. Special bottling equipment is needed. All are expensive and necessary items. But in whatever direction the business continues to grow, Mark knows that he will be carrying on not only Augie's name, but his humble dedication and passion.