

INSIDE BUSINESS

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SMALL BUSINESS STRATEGIES

Louis P. Sodano's business lets him and his clients indulge in their passion for winemaking.

Roll out the barrel

By **GRETCHEN SCHMIDHAUSLER**
CORRESPONDENT

Ruby red wine rests in a delicate glass. Italian opera music plays softly in the background. Oak barrels can be found as far as the eye can see. The scent of fermenting wine wafts through the air.

If you didn't know better, you might think you were back in the Old Country, or at least in one of the New World's fancy wineries.

You'd be wrong on both counts. Located in a small warehouse on Shrewsbury Avenue in Tinton Falls, the Wine Experience is somewhat of an anomaly. It is not one of New Jersey's 17 wineries, which grow their own grapes and produce wine for sale, nor is it a retail facility that sells its product to the public.

Rather, the Wine Experience is a place where wine lovers, either individually or as a group, can go and make their own wine.

The business holds a public warehouse license from the Bureau of Alcoholic Beverage Control, one of only four in the state. Under this license, clients are permitted to make, bottle and take home wine they have made with help from owner Louis P. Sodano, 63, of Monmouth Beach.

This year, the business produced 119 barrels of wine, or just over 6,300 gallons, compared with 50 barrels the first year and 83 barrels last year.

"This year I made a profit," Sodano said.

Sodano bought the business, originally called the Vintage Brew Company, two years ago. He explained that the then-owners couldn't devote the time needed to the enterprise and so they decided to sell. Coincidentally, Sodano, who had been making wine as a hobby for more than 40 years, was looking for a part-time business to occupy himself during his retirement.

He realized that even with his love of wine and the winemaking knowledge he already possessed, he would need to



BRIAN FERREIRA/Staff Photographer

Louis P. Sodano raises a glass of cabernet at his Tinton Falls business, the Wine Experience. In front of him stand some of the award winners made under his supervision.

become an expert. So, at the age of 61, Sodano apprenticed himself to Frank Salek, owner of Sylvin Farms, a winery in Galloway. Under Salek's tutelage, Sodano learned everything he could about the art - and the business - of winemaking.

Considering the cost of labor, ingredients and storage, winemaking is not an inexpensive pursuit. The Wine Experience charges between \$1,000 to \$1,450 per barrel of wine. Each barrel yields about 250 bottles of wine. That's only about \$4 or \$6 a bottle, Sodano said. Many customers go in together on one barrel, while others make multiple barrels themselves, he said.

Once customers decide what kind of wine they will make, Sodano orders the appropriate grapes from California. Grapes arrive in the fall, soon after the harvest.

Aspiring winemakers can choose from both new and traditional white and red varieties, or opt to make a blend. Over the next nine to 10 months, the winemakers must devote about five hours to their designer wine. Once it is bottled and labeled in the summer months, it is theirs to take home. Sodano advises his customers to wait 12 to 18 months before drinking it.

Although he uses fresh grapes for his customers' wines, Sodano has been experimenting

with frozen grapes. Depending on the results, using frozen fruit will give people the ability to make wine at any time of year and spread out his workload.

Sodano relies on word-of-mouth advertising and repeat customers. He said he has not yet advertised.

Although Sodano took the venture seriously from the beginning, he never envisioned that a much-loved hobby would turn into a demanding business venture. For example, although the wine is made in the fall months due to the availability of grapes, Sodano must keep busy monitoring the wine in progress up until it is bottled, about nine months later.

While clients actually perform the work involved in making the wine, the maintenance of the winery and the ensuring of the quality of the wine falls to Sodano. Due to evaporation, for instance, each barrel must remain filled to the top to guard against oxidation, which would mar the finished product.

Sodano accomplishes this by regularly topping off each barrel with a small amount of wine added through a capped hole, or bung, in the top of the barrel. This process alone is a slow and tedious one, especially for one person, Sodano noted.

Despite the challenges of running a one-man, labor-intensive business, Sodano said he enjoys working by himself. Also, the end result is well worth the time spent.

"This is my fun. I don't want to hire anyone else to do it. I looked into a winery and realized it was not for me. Here, I get the results and can do all the work myself," Sodano said.

Of course, Sodano must also taste each of the 119 barreled wines on a regular basis to ensure quality control. He often enlists the help of a wine-loving friend or two for this task.

In addition to his technical and sensory expertise, Sodano, an entrepreneur who has previously worked in a number of retail businesses and is the former mayor of Monmouth Beach, brings his people skills into play on a regular basis. He stressed that in a business like this, that's as important as knowing how to make good wine.

"You have to treat the wine right. You have to treat the customers right. And you have to have fun doing it," Sodano said.

Sodano plans to move to a larger facility in the near future. Although he would like to see his production increase to 150 barrels, he wants to keep his "hobby" manageable. "I intend to expand. That doesn't mean I want to make 400 barrels a year," he said. "I need the room to operate correctly."