

High spirits: Grafton Winery and Brewhaus named business of the month

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GRAFTON - The Grafton Winery and Brewhaus has been recognized as the River Bend Growth Association Business of the Month for February.

"We are very proud," said Mike Nikonovich, who owns the winery along with his wife, Lori. "It is a great organization to work with, and I was thrilled just to be nominated."

Lori Nikonovich also serves as an ambassador for the RBGA.

"We were tickled and shocked when we found out," she said.

The Grafton Winery opened for business at 300 West Main in December 2008. In addition to a full production winery, the business also featured a full gift shop, restaurant and banquet center.

Mike and Lori previously owned a winery in Edwardsville from 2006 until 2009.

"It was much smaller than this one, but we were learning," Mike said. "We got our feet wet and we really enjoyed it."

Opening the Grafton location proved to be a much larger undertaking, and the result of the couple's hard work is a multi-functional business that feels overwhelming, welcoming, cozy and elegant - all at once.

"We were nervous when we opened the restaurant," Mike said. "We were going to go simple, but it kept growing and evolving."

The upstairs dining area features an indoor capacity of about 300, with room for another 200 people on the outside patio overlooking the river. The owners added a fireplace to one end of the dining room last October and are planning on adding a second this year.

"It is great when the weather is nice and we can open up the patio doors," Mike said. "When the patio is full, it's like a giant party. It was so neat to hear the noise of the crowd one time as I was nearing the winery. The Zydeco Crawdaddies were playing live, and they had given out shakers to the crowd, which were actually just soda cans filled with shot. The place was packed with people all shaking their cans. It was incredible."

The restaurant often is filled to capacity on the weekends, including during the off season.

"The weekends will sometimes just explode," Lori said. "There is no rhyme or reason to it. It is really a lot of fun when you get the people and the energy going."

Executive chef Joe Richnak has worked hard to expand the restaurant's menu from simply "bar food" to more elegant and sophisticated fare. His country club and fine dining experience in the St. Charles and St. Louis areas raises the food selections to a whole new level.

The restaurant offers soups and salads, finger foods, sandwiches and burgers in addition to entrees such as Chilean sea bass and mahi mahi.

"I am excited about our Friday night dinner specials," Richnak said. "We are aiming for more of a fine dining atmosphere. That is what I really love doing."

Downstairs, a complete gift shop offers local souvenirs such as hats, shirts, candles, corks, and, of course, wine glasses. Lori's parents, Don and Pat McNew, help out with day-to-day operations.

What brings in the tourists and connoisseurs alike, though, is the full production winery. The glass-enclosed production area allows tours and visitors the chance to view wine production in progress. Mike said the apple crisp fruit wine and harbor red are the two big sellers, but all of the assorted white, red, rose, fruit and dessert wines are popular.

The Grafton Winery also offers custom labels, including photos, perfect for graduations, retirements and birthdays.

In August 2009, the couple added the Brewhaus, featuring handcrafted ales, darks and pilsners in 16-ounce draft pints.

"The Brewhaus is a work in progress," Mike said. "We have 155-gallon tanks, and we hope to have kegs available by spring. Our son Mike Jr. runs the Brewhaus."

The Nikonovich family said the exceptional staff is one reason why the winery is successful year-round.

"Having a business in Grafton can pose a challenge," Mike said. "People hear the river is up and they always assume Grafton is flooded, which doesn't happen nearly as often as people think."

"Our staff keeps people coming back. They work hard, and they have a lot of fun with the customers and with each other. They are all good workers, and the customers can tell they (love their job)."

The Grafton Winery is open Monday through Saturday from 11 a.m. until 7 p.m. and Sundays from noon until 7 p.m. The restaurant stays open until 9 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays. Group tours, birthday celebrations and wedding ceremonies are welcome by appointment.

Monthly events include a murder mystery dinner on March 12, and a live blues fest on May 22 and 23 featuring local acts such as the Soulard Blues Band, Pennsylvania Slim, the Ivas John Band and Hudson and the Hoo Doo Cats.

For more information call (618) 786-3001, visit the Web site at www.thegrafftonwinery.com or the Facebook page at www.graftonwineryandbrewhaus.

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