

A More Pressing Engagement



Attorney Leaves Law Behind to Make Award-Winning Wines

Paula Williamson turned to Traé Ottmers and Capital Farm Credit to help her winery grow.

For winemaker Paula Williamson, Fredericksburg in the early 1990s was the right place at the right time. It just took her about a decade to get there.

It was on trips to Europe that the San Antonio attorney first fell in love with vineyards and the winery lifestyle, and an emerging Texas wine industry made her realize that she could have that life at home. Once she made up her mind to become a full-time winemaker, she started a search for the perfect property, first in Bandera and Boerne, then in Fredericksburg, where she eventually relocated her main law office to prepare for the transition to a new career.

After two years without luck, she walked into a Fredericksburg real estate office with a list of conditions she required for her vineyard: a slope, a breeze, good drainage and a creek. “And the Realtor said, ‘I can do that. Come back next Saturday,’” she says.

When Williamson saw the first property they visited that day in 1992, she knew it was the one. Soil testing confirmed that the conditions were right for a vineyard, so she bought the land and began planting grapes within two years, eventually building a 6,200-square-foot production facility and taking on a private tutor in the art and science of making wine.

“It was a huge learning curve,” she says. But with the help of veteran Fredericksburg winemaker Vernon Gold, Napa Valley winemaker Bob Pepi and short courses in wine chemistry at the University of California, Davis, she studied both the Texas and California methods of making wine. More importantly, she began to learn how to create the fun, fruit-forward wines that she likes.

Visitors liked them, too. After Chisholm Trail Winery started selling its first wines in 2001, guests would drop by the winery’s first tasting area, a concrete pad at one end of the production building. When busloads of guests started forming lines from one end of the long building



Just west of Fredericksburg, Chisholm Trail Winery makes a variety of award-winning wines.

to the other, past the steel tanks and the American and French oak barrels, Williamson knew it was time to expand.

Finding Farm Credit

Williamson first took her plans for a tasting room to her commercial bank, but rather than offer financing, the lender referred her to Capital Farm Credit.

Commercial banks often don't handle loans for unique businesses, and it can be difficult to find one that understands agricultural needs, says Traé Ottmers, vice president for lending at Capital's Fredericksburg office.

Chisholm Trail Winery is open from noon to 6 p.m. daily. It will host several special events in 2012, including:

- live music during Jazz in January on Jan. 14
- Spring Fling on March 31
- its 11th Birthday Celebration on June 2
- a grape stomp on Sept. 1

The winery also participates in events of the Fredericksburg Wine Road 290 (www.wineroad290.com) and the Texas Hill Country Wineries (www.texaswinetrail.com).

As she has done for many of her improvements, Williamson paid for her tasting room out of pocket, but she needed a lender's help with other expenses such as climate control and bottling equipment.

"Capital Farm Credit has been a lifesaver, believe me," Williamson says.

She has returned to Capital Farm Credit in recent years to help her expand her wine production and enter new markets. And in her production facility, the nine stainless steel tanks where she chills, ferments and stores up to 15,000 gallons of wine are leased through Farm Credit Leasing.

Helping rural customers is one of the reasons Ottmers returned to Fredericksburg, his hometown, to do business. The lender



Eric Savage

During the winery's annual grape stomp, participants can capture their grape-stained footprints on a souvenir bandana, hung to dry near an acre of blanc du bois grapevines.

has degrees in animal science and agribusiness that prepared him to assist clients who need financing for a ranch, production agriculture or a small business such as a vineyard and winery. Those customers are sometimes in for a shock when they see Texas Hill Country land prices.

"This area and Blanco, Kerr and Kendall counties have some of the highest rural land prices in the state," he says.

But wineries are capitalizing on the area's popularity, climate and soil conditions. About a dozen now line the U.S. 290 corridor from Fredericksburg to Johnson City, drawing visitors who arrive by car, bus and chartered limousine. Even more producers and tasting rooms are on the way. Statewide, the number of wineries has grown from 46 in 2001, the year Chisholm Trail sold its first wine, to more than 220 today, according to the Texas Department of Agriculture.

Williamson says she doesn't see the winery boom as competition, because wines made with the same grape can taste completely different at the hands of different winemakers.

Easygoing Ambience

On Williamson's 80 acres, longhorns roam outside the vineyard, evoking the symbol on Chisholm Trail's label. Miniature Bethlehem donkeys act as mascots for the winery, and horses have the run of the place.

It's all part of the laid-back atmosphere at the winery, where guests can sample the wines, have a light meal, play horseshoes and take in the Hill Country views from the covered porch. Many sign up for Chisholm Trail's wine club, which offers discounts on wine to about 400 members.

Williamson continues to make changes to improve her visitors' experience. In March she added a wood-fired pizza oven and a commercial kitchen designed by friend and chef Mike Boase. She's also been lining the walls of the tasting room with old



Eric Savage

You don't have to be 21 to enjoy the fruits of the winery's labors. A grape stomp in late summer is popular with families.

siding, knotty pine shiplap and ceiling planks salvaged from an old farmhouse and garage that had been on the property. Antique German doors summon both

the heritage of Fredericksburg's early settlers and the allure of the European wine country that first caught the winemaker's attention on her travels.

The work she has put into her wines is showing, too. Chisholm Trail has won awards continuously since the year it opened, and each year from 2008 to 2010, it won two awards at the Lone Star International Wine Competition, including a gold medal for its 2008 Lone Wolf.

"This one has amazingly intense and complex flavors," Williamson says of the winning red wine. Part of its mystique is the Lenoir grape, which also goes by the name of black Spanish and is one of Williamson's favorite varieties. "I love to blend with black Spanish. It adds another fruit dimension."

Williamson also produces one dry white wine, five dry red wines, one port-style desert wine and three sweet wines, including her top seller, Ghost Rider. In her experience, Texas consumers who are cultivating a taste for wine in the state's relatively young industry have a preference for sweeter wines. But even Chisholm Trail's dry wines have a



Lumber salvaged from old buildings at the vineyard lines the walls of the tasting room, where tables are supported by sturdy grapevines.

light quality because they are low in tannins, allowing the flavor of the fruit to dominate — just the way Williamson likes them.

Ten years after she sold her first wines, she has big plans for the winery's future. She will bottle about 2,000 cases of wine this year and hopes to someday produce 10,000 cases a year. She will continue to plant more grapes at her vineyard, and she'll finish out the tasting room, where she hosts live music and other events. But even if she didn't change a thing, she already has reached a personal goal.

"Law wasn't fun," she says. "This is fun." ■ CF

A Toast to Texas Winemakers

Capital Farm Credit finances numerous vineyards and wineries, many of which offer tasting rooms, gift shops, eateries, live music and other events. Winery tasting rooms are open on the days listed below, but check before you go for times, which vary through the year.

Alamosa Wine Cellars: Located about 15 miles southeast of San Saba, this winery has a tasting room at 677 County Road 430 in Bend that is open on Saturdays; (325) 628-3313. A new tasting room at 2204 U.S. 281 S. in Lampasas is open daily; (512) 556-0001. www.alamosawinecellars.com

Bernhardt Winery: The winery has built a new facility that doubles its capacity, and the old winery now hosts concerts, car shows and other events. Sample wines in the tasting room on Tuesday through Sunday, or stay the night in the bed-and-breakfast. 9042 County Road 204, Plantersville; (936) 894-9829. www.bernhardtwinery.com

Chisholm Trail Winery: On a gentle slope about 12 miles west of town, this winery's tasting room is open daily, and a wood-fired pizza oven fires up on Friday through Sunday. 2367 Usener Road, Fredericksburg; (830) 990-2675. www.chisholmtrailwinery.com

Driftwood Estate Winery: About six miles south of Dripping Springs, the winery's tasting room is open daily. A covered pavilion and picnic tables have views of the vineyard and the Hill Country. 4001 Elder Hill Road, Driftwood; (512) 858-9667. www.driftwoodvineyards.com

Fall Creek Vineyards: Named for the nearby waterfalls that flow into Lake Buchanan, the winery was established in 1975 on the lake's northwest shore. Fall Creek's tasting room is open daily. 1820 County Road 222, Tow; (325) 379-5361. www.fcv.com

Grape Creek Vineyards: Spend the day at this winery 10 miles east of Fredericksburg or stay the night in the bed-and-breakfast. Visitors can sample wines in the tasting room, which is open daily, or take one of the daily barrel-tasting tours at the production facility nearby. 10587 E. U.S. 290, Fredericksburg; (830) 644-2710. www.grapecreek.com

Pleasant Hill Winery: Just south of Brenham, this winery hosts occasional food-and-wine pairings. Tours and tastings are available on weekends. 1441 Salem Road, Brenham; (979) 830-8463. www.pleasanthillwinery.com

Red Caboose Winery: This winery is named for an old-fashioned caboose, but it has a new way of making wine. Solar panels help power the facility, which produces geothermally chilled wines from grapes irrigated with rainwater. The tasting room at the winery, 1147 County Road 1110, Meridian, is open Friday through Sunday; (254) 435-9911. A second tasting room at 903 S. Avenue G, Clifton, is open Thursday through Sunday; (254) 675-0099. www.redcaboosewinery.com

Torre di Pietra: This winery east of Fredericksburg offers a tasting room that is open daily and live music on Saturdays. 10915 E. U.S. 290, Fredericksburg; (830) 644-2829. www.texashillcountrywine.com

Westcave Cellars Winery: One of the newest wineries in the region, Westcave Cellars has tastings on Friday through Sunday. 25711 Hamilton Pool Road, Round Mountain; (512) 431-1403. www.westcavecellars.com

William Chris Vineyard: This winery 10 miles west of Johnson City offers daily tastings and live music on Saturdays. 10352 U.S. 290, Hye; (830) 998-7654. www.williamchriswines.com

Woodrose Winery: This winery 13 miles east of Fredericksburg is open daily for tastings. Live music is played on Saturdays. 662 Woodrose Lane, Stonewall; (830) 644-2539. www.woodrosewinery.com