

Homemade Wine: Make Some Magic!

By Jane Murphy

Whether you're creative or not, interested in science – or not, enjoy an inexpensive hobby, or simply like to try new things, wine making may be just the thing for you. And, if you love wine, you might love it even more if you nurture it from its humble beginnings. Wine making is a little like making magic, really. And who doesn't need a little magic in their lives?

Vern Holm and his wife Bonnie know a thing or two about making wine and they share their magic with thousands of customers through their business, BlueStem Winery in Parkersburg, Iowa. After discovering his grandfather's recipe, Vern made his first batch in 1976 and still has some on reserve.

The Holms started BlueStem (named for the native Iowa prairie grass) four years ago, but they took a different path than most vintners. They decided to stock and sell beer-brewing and winemaking supplies and kits to meet what they saw as a growing interest around the world. Their huge Web-based business sells to more than 3,000 customers in numerous countries and all 50 states. Holm just released his first wine in May 2007. He only sells BlueStem's wines "on location," because he wants the chance to talk with customers first-hand about his wines and how to make their own. He even offers wine-making classes, based on using one of his kits or simply using backyard fruits. "My customers make wine from grapes and anything else that catches their fancy—jalapeno peppers, coffee, lemons..." Vern says.

Making homemade wines, or magic, as it may seem, is really something anyone can do. Select a kit or a recipe, follow the directions, and you're on your way to one of life's great pleasures. To help you get started, Vern outlines the basic steps involved:

1. Gather up your ingredients. Typically this includes fruit, sugar, water, the wine additives required for your particular wine, and wine yeast. A typical batch size is six gallons, which equals about 30 bottles of wine.

2. Wash your equipment with hot, soapy water and rinse well. Then sanitize all of the equipment with either a commercial sanitizer or with a sulphite solution. Equipment includes things like primary and secondary containers, or fermenters, a stirrer, a siphon hose, etc. The primary fermenter is usually a food-grade plastic bucket, which is about two gallons larger in capacity than the batch of wine being made; so an eight-gallon bucket is needed for a six-gallon batch of wine. The secondary fermenter, also called a carboy, is typically a glass jug.)

3. Take the sanitized primary fermenter and place the fruit into a nylon mesh bag and tie a knot in the end. Crush the fruit to extract the juice by vigorously kneading the bag. Holm said it helps if the fruit has been frozen. Then, add in some of the water and sugar to get the required gravity, or percentage of sugar content, as specified in your particular recipe. Gravity is measured by using a tool, called a hydrometer. Continue to add in water and/or sugar until the specific gravity and the right amount of liquid (usually six gallons) is reached. Stir thoroughly. Cover the primary fermenter with cheesecloth, which allows the CO₂ that develops to escape.

4. After 24 hours, and with an ambient temperature between 70 to 75 degrees, add the yeast. Evidence of fermentation should be noticeable within 24 hours after adding the

yeast. Then maintain a temperature of approximately 70 degrees, and allow the wine to reach the desired specific gravity, (this will usually take about a week). Once this happens, siphon or “rack” the wine from the primary fermenter to the secondary fermenter, or carboy. Repeat this process after a week, and then in two more weeks. Continue intermittent “rackings” until the wine is clear. Holm indicated another important ingredient here: patience. “The more patient you are, the clearer your wine will be,” he said. “Impatient types can use a filter to clear their wines more quickly,” noted Holm. A hydrometer can most accurately determine whether or not the wine is stable and ready for bottling. Wine makers should allow six months to a year before drinking whites and one-to-two years for reds. While you are patiently waiting for your wine to be ready, keep those creative juices flowing and think up clever names and funky labels for your wine. And don’t forget to add the date; this is one moment in time you don’t want to forget.

According to Holm, a common misconception is that corks should breathe, when, in fact, the opposite is true. The wine should not come in contact with air during its storage period. This is known as oxygenation and causes the wine to discolor and lose its taste; essentially, it becomes like vinegar. Holm says the time for wine to breathe is just before you drink it. This is called aeration and is a good thing!

There are countless resources with recipes or directions for making homemade wines. In fact, Holm said the same basic ingredients (in varying quantities) and the same basic processes are used to make most wines. He recommends the book, *Mary’s Recipes* for beginners who want to know how to make various grape, fruit and vegetable wines, the equipment needed, and how to troubleshoot when things don’t go as planned. One Internet site worth checking out is www.homemadewine.com. Holm recommends first-timers try a wine kit, which includes directions and all the necessary ingredients for a guaranteed good homemade wine. His plethora of kits range from \$60 to \$170 dollars and produce anything from ultra dry to really sweet wines and everything in between. For a more inexpensive, ad-lib approach, Holm said homemade wine without a kit costs only about \$25 for several six-gallon batches.

So, is wine making an art or a science? Holm said, “Mostly science, but with sometimes a little creativity (art) thrown in.” Marty Blind, head of the Eastern Iowa Wine Club—a group that focuses on the trials and successes of making homemade wine, agrees that wine making is both an art and a science. He asserts that it’s virtually impossible to produce the same wine twice, even if the same kinds of grapes or the same wine kits are used. Perhaps that’s part of the magic of wine making.

Paul Gordon of Pleasantville, Iowa, recently started making homemade wines. He used two different kits, and now he’s ready to venture off and use his own fruit. To Gordon, a soon-to-be art teacher, wine making is about being creative. “Basically you just play around with it until you get what you want,” he said.

Art or science it’s just plain fun. To think that bottling some “special juice” from the work of your hands could actually capture a season or special moment in time—the sights, sounds, feelings, smells are there for you to relive months or years down the road when you finally taste your very own wine. Magic? Maybe. Give it a try, and judge for yourself.

Check out www.bluestemwine.com to find a variety of wine kits, winemaking supplies and how-to information. BlueStem Winery is located at 305 Third St., Parkersburg, IA 50665

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