

BY TRISH WILLIAMS

KEMBLESVILLE — Giving up a good paying job when jobs were scarce; seeking a sizable loan when there were none; trying to buy farmland against a transition to residential building; and fighting local opposition to a new industry; Thomas McKeon bucked the odds and won.

McKeon, a man of impressive stature, who describes himself as "a stubborn Irishman," was undaunted by the obstacles. The lifestyle he strove for had much greater meaning to him than anything that got in his way.

What McKeon envisioned was establishing a vineyard and winery, where he would live and work at peace, in a "pleasant lifestyle." What he had not anticipated, was the opposition that would confront him in attaining that vision.

A resourceful man, McKeon enlisted the assistance of the Chester County Agricultural Development Council (ADC) to help him get established. ADC formed with the intent to retain the County's farmland by encouraging and assisting ag business. ADC saw McKeon's concept of the vineyard as feasible way to do that.

Unbuttoning the white-collar

McKeon, a PhD chemist, first started thinking about starting a vineyard about seven years ago. At that time he was working as a research chemist for General Electric in Philadelphia, earning a comfortable salary, with full benefits, and living in King of Prussia.

Why then would he give up this financial security for farming?

"I was tired of working for someone else," said McKeon, displaying the independent nature of a farmer. "I decided I could have a pleasant lifestyle combined with a business that I felt that I could do a good job at."

McKeon was a wine fancier, growing a few varieties of wine grapes in his backyard and making his own wine while working for GE. He had even dug a wine cellar in the basement of his home.

When McKeon sang at the wedding of Gerry Olsyn, assistant superintendent of the Morris Arboretum in Philadelphia, he discovered Olsyn shared his enthusiasm for viticulture and winemaking. Olsyn had begun a small demonstration vineyard at the arboretum, and took some cuttings from McKeon's vines to add to the collection. Like the cuttings, the friendship grew.

The two later started throwing around the idea of becoming partners in their own wine business. Following their own area of expertise, they agreed Olsyn would manage the vineyard, and



Fruitful efforts



In their quest for preserving farmland, representatives of the Chester County Agricultural Development Council, Bob McRae, left and Steve Kehs, helped McKeon get his winery established as an agricultural accessory, believing that farmland will only be preserved if it is profitable to the farm.



McKeon would manage the winery.

When the two began to look for land suitable for the enterprise, McKeon realized the time involved in getting the project off the ground would be more than he could give while working at GE. So he left the company.

"The personal metamorphosis was tremendous," recalled McKeon. "It was quite a change going from the security of GE to putting everything you own on the line for your own business. Fortunately, my wife, Margaret, works, and was able to pull us through the transition."

Rolling up the shirt sleeves
Making the commitment was the first step on a long path, filled with

obstacles, diversions and dead ends.

McKeon set about gathering ammunition, the facts and figures he needed to arm himself for his fight to get started. He started visiting vineyards in California, New York and Erie, Pa., observing cultural practices and winemaking techniques. As he traveled he looked for a possible site. At first he considered the Nappa Valley in California, the largest concentration of vineyards in the United States.

After realizing that it was nearly impossible to break into the Nappa Valley area, McKeon and Olsyn decided on a site in Pennsylvania. Agricultural experts at Penn State recommended locating in the southeast part of the state, where soil and climate are more favorable for growing grapes.

It took the two partners two years of searching for a site with the right technical requirements and potential needed consumer support. McKeon estimates they looked at between 75 and 100 properties throughout, Lehigh, Berks, Bucks, Delaware, and Montgomery counties before they settled on their present site in southern Chester County, owned by William Wingate.

"The Wingate property seemed delightful for our purpose," said McKeon. "Located on a road with good traffic count, the property offered rich, deep Glenelg and Manor loam soils. Most of the fields are between three to eight percent slope, facing south to southeast. This would allow good water and air drainage, allowing the soils to warm up early in the

the chemist at work



McKeon, a PHD chemist, enjoys the comforts of his own laboratory.

local flavor



Brandywine vineyards offers a gifts selection packaged in decorative wooden boxes created by a local craftsman.

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