

A Mountaintop Winery



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Photography by: **Lance C. Bell**

The Christian W. Klay winery boasts more than the award-winning wines — spectacular mountaintop views and a rich history of welcoming guests are also part of the Chalk Hill, Pennsylvania vineyard.

In 1986 Sharon and John Klay bought 216 acres of land once owned by U.S. Senator William Crow in Chalk Hill, PA. Within a few years the Klay's converted the former dairy farm into a mountaintop winery and now they have 11 wines in production and a yearlong list of tours and activities available on the property. The business, named after the couple's 18-year-old son Christian, also includes a tasting room and retail gift shop where the wine and gift baskets are sold. Visitors come from as far away as Germany, Canada, Japan and China.

A Winemaker's Early Roots

While living in NYC in the 70's, Sharon and John Klay developed an interest in starting a vineyard. They began the research and selection of the nearly 100 varieties of grapes, which would be suitable for cool climate growing conditions. Upon relocation to



Pittsburgh, PA, the Klay's then spent three years searching for the ideal site for their dream winery. In 1986 the search ended with the purchase of the 215-acre Fayette Springs Farm in Chalk Hill, PA.

John had initially ordered 1,000 vines. Sharon quickly realized that this was too much for grape jelly and not enough for wine so she ordered the next 13,000 vines. With the help of Ray Mathews, vineyard manager, the next 12 acres of vineyard were established over a period of five years.

Sharon feels strongly that her background in dental hygiene contributes valuable chemistry knowledge necessary for winemaking and that her studies in studio art and art history are the foundation of her ability to blend wines. "I apply blending much as one would mix a richer paint hue," says Sharon.

Sharon also oversees the daily operations of the winery and spends much of her time planning the special events that the winery is known for. 'Wine & Dine in the Woods' is just one of the popular activities at the vineyard. These special theme dinners typically begin with a wagon ride to the top of the vineyard, a special theme dinner and a wine tasting. Other events include the annual Chili Cook-Off & Mountain Harvest Festival and murder mystery dinners.

The winery is also a popular destination for weddings. During the summer of 2003, twelve wedding ceremonies and receptions were held at the winery. Given the spectacular surroundings, it's no surprise that so many couples have chosen to celebrate at this location.

The farm has a long history of welcoming guests. At the turn of the century it was owned by U.S. Senator William E. Crow, who received many guests, including President Harding and Black Jack Pershing, at his mountain estate. The Fayette Springs Farm is also the headwaters of springs that were sought after for their "medicinal powers," popular in Victorian times.

The mountaintop vineyard has a unique microclimate and panoramic tri-state views. It was selected for grape growing due to its rocky, well-drained soils and elevations. At 2,350 feet, it is the highest elevation vineyard east of the Rocky Mountains. During the establishment of the vineyard, the Klays embarked on a five-year course of study of vineyard management and winemaking, visiting over 200 wineries and programs at major universities. This information was then adapted for use in their cool climate site.

The home of the winery is a beautifully restored 1880's Queen Anne style barn. The retail sales and tasting rooms are located in the lower level, with the top level being used for special events and private parties. In keeping with the agricultural tradition of Pennsylvania farm wineries, the Klay's offer guests the "total wine experience," from the beauty of the vineyard and tours of the winemaking facility, to daily wine tastings. Visitors can also learn about cool climate grape growing and the wine making process during a private tour with the winemaker or vineyard manager.

"I love the challenge of it all. It's very exciting to see all of this work together," says Sharon, looking at all of the miles of vineyards that surround her. "We are just a city block away from Rt. 40, but when you come here to the vineyard you can be anywhere in the world. Maybe it's California, France or Italy. People don't expect to see this in Western Pennsylvania."

Altitude is Everything

While many may think that growing grapes in the Chestnut Ridge may not be wise, the couple found 12 acres of the 216 perfect for their crop. The vineyard's central location atop a plateau is extremely helpful because it benefits from constant airflow, which protects it from late-spring and early-fall frosts and reduces disease that may otherwise harm the grapes.

"Experts say that mountaintop grapes are the best because they offer a complex taste as they are grown, adapting to hot days and cool nights," Sharon explains. The sandstone soil also is a plus. The stones help hold the heat in so that it radiates back to the vine at night to help ripen the grapes.

Eventually one grape can combine with more than 100 other varieties to produce 11 distinct flavors. The National Road Collection, honoring historic sites along the nation's first highway, takes on names such as Blanc de Lafayette and Washington Tavern Red. Each hand-labeled bottle is equipped with history about each site.

"I wanted to promote this area and share

its beauty with everyone," says Sharon. "A winery has a sense of mystique to it. The feeling of romance, the process, the tasting. We're the perfect model of agritourism. People can come and visit and get a little history, too."

Keep up with the schedule of events by visiting www.cwklaywinery.com.

Directions:

Located in Southwestern Pennsylvania's Laurel Highland, convenient to Rt. 40. From Rt. 40 in Chalk Hill, turn left onto Fayette Springs Road. The winery is 300 yards further on the left.

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Fred and Sharon Gee, visitors from Des Moines, IA, sample some of the prize winning wines (bottom photo) at the winery tasting room.

