



WINE & DINE

KIEPERSOL WINERY,
DISTILLERY CONTINUES
LEGACY OF A FAMILY MAN
WITH BIG DREAMS

STORY BY TAMI BROOKS
PHOTOS BY SARAH A. MILLER
PHOTOS COURTESY OF KIEPERSOL





KIEPERSOL
ENTERPRISES

Texas Semillon
2014



Located in the Piney Woods, Kiepersol is a destination for foodies, oenophiles, and now, lovers of craft cocktails. It is also a story of one man's love of farming and family.

On Feb. 21, 1984, Pierre de Wet caught a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty from the small window of a plane as it landed at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City. He would soon be in the United States for the first time.

Newly widowed, he had come from South Africa to build a new life in America. He had four suitcases, some money and his daughters, Marnelle, 4, and Velmay, 2.

He carried a small piece of paper in his wallet with the name of a professor at Texas A&M University in College Station who he'd met three years earlier. Hoping that the man remembered him and could help him find work, Pierre and his daughters boarded their next flight to Texas.

Pierre did find a job, just not in Texas. The family spent the next few years living out West, where Pierre used the knowledge and skills he'd gained while on his parents' farm in South Africa.

Even though Pierre was making a good living as a consultant for farming operations, he longed to be a farmer again. He knew the next step was acquiring his own place — their own place.

He moved his family to farming friendly East Texas in 1994 and after an extensive search bought 73 acres of densely wooded land near Bullard that he named Kiepersol in honor of his father's farm.

1994 was also the year Pierre completed the lengthy process to become a citizen of the United States.

In his book, "The Story of We," he says, "Looking back, I realize it's not a piece of paper that made me an American citizen any more than the pages in the Bible make me a Christian. It's a state of mind. It wasn't hard to fall in love with the United States."

Pierre taught his girls lessons about business and agriculture. When Marnelle asked if she could

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— PIERRE DE WET







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grow peaches, he explained the difficulty of selling a seasonal perishable product.

"Daddy said that if everyone has peaches and they are all ripe today, you don't have any demand," Marnelle shares. "If they import the peaches, you have no demand. But if you (are able to) can that peach, you turn your product into a commodity, and you can sell it when there is high demand. That's how he taught us about supply and demand."

Pierre suggested they grow grapes and make wine. If wine isn't sold right away, it only increases in value.

"He said the crop would be protected inside those bottles," Marnelle recalls.

Very few people were growing grapes and making wine in East Texas. Undeterred, Marnelle and Pierre planted a one-acre vineyard to determine how different varieties reacted to the soil and climate.

While Marnelle went to California to further her education about wine making, Velmay developed a passion for hospitality and business operations. In 1999, the family built a fine-dining restaurant and a beautiful bed and breakfast on the property.

"Daddy wanted fine dining without the drive (to a big city). Nothing fru-fru — those were his exact words," Marnelle laughs. "Just meat and potatoes, an excellent meal, nicely presented with a comfortable atmosphere."

The family eventually planted 14 acres of grapes and purchased the equipment to launch wine making. They produced their first wine in 2000.

Since then, Kiepersol has grown a crop each year and now has 63 acres under cultivation. All of the fruit in Kiepersol wines is grown onsite, making Kiepersol the largest estate winery in Texas.

When Pierre passed away in 2016, Marnelle and Velmay, lost their best friend, boss, mentor, hero, and, most significantly, their dad.

"Imagine a glorious ship with a magnificent captain sailing steadfastly in one direction — the captain was our dad. And 2016 was a huge storm, putting a damaged ship into the harbor," laments Marnelle. "The hurt was unimaginable."

The sisters made a pact to continue their father's legacy and do what was right in God's eyes. With 75 employees depending on them and a payroll deadline looming, they got back to work.

"We began fixing that ship in the harbor. Rebuilding it and learning," Marnelle says emphatically.

The current coronavirus pandemic has brought new challenges. They were forced to temporarily close the restaurant and tasting room and had to furlough most of their employees.

"We sat in the bar; it was like a ghost town, completely empty. It created such a void not having our staff and our customers. It was so sad," sighs Marnelle.

They briefly considered selling the estate and



Marnelle Durrett says, “we decided that we wanted a place where we could utilize our God-given talents and have a place that can keep us all. So Kiepersol means, ‘keep us all.’”

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moving to Mexico. As they took stock of everything they love, they agreed that even if they moved to Mexico, they would still be growing something and feeding people.

“It’s what we do. It’s what we’re good at,” Velmay states proudly. “We have to create and build.”

Adds Marnelle, “We started to go from the negative and moved and shifted to the positive. We stopped worrying and decided to give it to God.”

The sisters say their father’s plan was to have a winery and a distillery. When the family opened the distillery in 2014, Pierre’s vision was to produce everything onsite and to have the ability to make any cocktail a customer might want.

The restaurant is now permitted as Kiepersol Distillery and Winery. Patrons can buy spirits and wine at the restaurant as well as in the tasting room. Kiepersol spirits are served exclusively.

Marnelle clarifies, “It’s like when you go to the

“It’s like when you go to the Nike (shoe) store, you get Nikes, not Adidas. If you want both, you go to Academy (store). We’re going to be like the Nike store.”

— MARNELLE DURRETT











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Committed to providing a true-craft experience, the products are distilled and infused onsite. Home-made cordials, creams, fruit infusions, herb tinctures and bitters are made fresh.

"Our infusionist, Emily, is making all of our liqueurs, mixers, tinctures and everything we need to make you all excellent cocktails! It's a very exciting time," says Velmay.

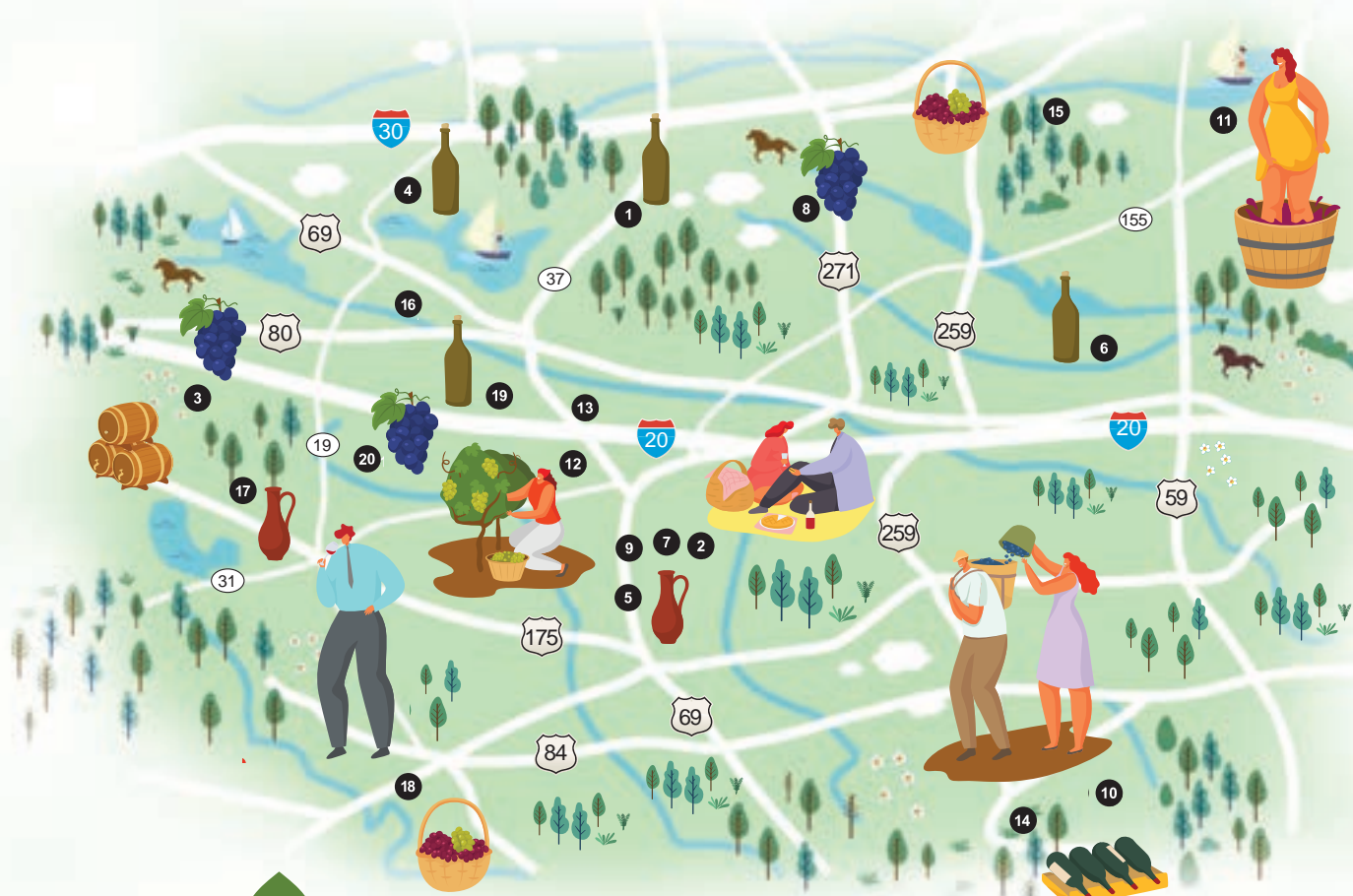
Recently, Pierre's Texuila and Dirk's Gin were added to the family of spirits they offer. Staff members help the restaurant patrons pair wines and craft cocktails with their food selections. Some employees have received certifications in mixology.

Excitedly, Velmay adds. "It (the distillery) completes the destination. Coming here is an experience."

At the new The Grand Room at Kiepersol, patrons can sample all of the wine and spirits and enjoy meats, cheeses and signature cocktails. In the new Infusion Room, guests on a tour of the property can see where the infusions, mixers and cocktails are perfected.

Velmay sums it up. "We're going to focus on what we're good at. Wine, spirits and food."





KATHRYN GARVIN/GRAPHIC

PINEY WOODS WINE TRAIL

STORY BY **DANNY MOGLE**

The Piney Woods Wine Trail is made up of 20 wineries scattered throughout the rolling hills of East Texas and near small towns from Mount Pleasant to Nacogdoches. Many produce award-winning wines. Check each winery's website for hours and amenities. Some are tasting rooms and require reservations while others have restaurants and hold tours and special events.

You can sample wines from all the wineries during the 10th annual Pine Woods Wine Festival set from 5 to 9 p.m. Nov. 6 and 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Nov. 7 at the Picker's Pavilion near downtown Lindale.

The festival also will feature live music from area bands, plenty of food selections and a marketplace full of crafts vendors.

Tickets cost \$10 to enter the Wine Garden where there will be \$1 wine tastings! Tickets can be purchased online at Eventbrite or VisitLindale's Facebook page.

PINEY WOODS WINE TRAIL WINERIES:

- 1 Bella Stella Winery**
818 County Road 4440, Winnsboro, bellastellawinery.com, 903-975-0020.
- 2 Briar Creek Vineyards**
10488 County Road 2180, (Yarbrough Lane) Whitehouse, briarcreekvineyards.com, 903-530-0286.
- 3 Cannon Creek Vineyard**
5518 Texas 198, Canton, cannoncreekvineyard.com, 903-520-0447.
- 4 Della Terra Farm**
2530 County Road 3425, Brashear, dellaterrafarm.com, 903-334-6600.
- 5 Dixie Wine Company**
47549 U.S. Highway 69, Mount Selman, Facebook.
- 6 Enoch's Stomp Vineyard and Winery**
870 Ferguson Road, Harleton, enochsstomp.com, 903-736-9494.
- 7 Kiepersol Vineyards & Winery**
21558 A Merlot Lane, Tyler (Bullard area), kiepersol.com, 903-894-8995.
- 8 Los Pinos Ranch Vineyards**
658 County Road 1334, Pittsburg, lospinosranchvineyards.com, 903-855-1769.
- 9 M6 Winery**
201 W. Main, Bullard, m6winery.com, 903-360-0369.
- 10 Naca Valley Vineyard**
9897 FM 1878, Nacogdoches; nacavalley.com, 936-615-6432.
- 11 O'Farrell Country Vineyards**
7152 FM 995, Atlanta, ofarrellvineyard.com, 903-846-2054.
- 12 Pelle Legna**
18655, County Road 418, Tyler, pellelegna.com, 903-521-6266.
- 13 Red 55 Winery/Miranda Lambert Store** 114 E. North St., Lindale, mirandalambert.com, 903-882-9305.
- 14 Red House Winery**
108 E. Pilar St., Nacogdoches, redhousewinery.com, 936-305-5068.
- 15 Red Road Winery & Vineyard**
105 W. Front St., Naples, redroadvineyard.com, 903-897-9353.
- 16 Silver Lake Cellars**
25378 U.S. Highway 80, Silver Lake, silverlakecellars.com, 972-898-8931.
- 17 Tara Vineyard & Winery**
8603 Henderson County Road 3914, Athens, tarawinery.com, 903-675-7023.
- 18 Texas Vineyard & Smokehaus**
2442 Anderson County Road 2133, Palestine, texasvineyard.org, 903-538-2950.
- 19 Valle della Pace Vineyards & Winery** 17840 Texas Highway 110 N., Garden Valley, valledellapace.com, 903-730-6721.
- 20 White Fox Vineyards**
14491 FM 773, Murchison, whitefoxvineyards.com, 903-469-3702.

For more information about the Trail, go to pineywoodswinetrail.com.