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Windsor-based wine publisher increases reach

by NATE MILLER, Staff Writer

North County businesses with an international reach may seem rare to most locals, but that doesn't mean they aren't around. One operation, based in Windsor, is establishing a growing influence in the wine industry.

Tucked into Windsor's North Bay Bank building are the offices of Vineyard & Winery Services, Inc., the publisher of Vineyard & Winery Management magazine. The company also produces a wine industry phone directory for the U.S. and Canada, and sponsors trade shows and wine competitions around the country.

Local wine industry professionals say they have come to depend on the magazine.

"We read it all the time. They have a lot of good articles and we try not to miss it," said Jim Young, vice-president and vineyard manager of Robert Young Estate Winery. "We also have an East Coast vineyard that we get ideas for from the magazine."

The second-generation company, originally based in New York, now has offices on both coasts and has expanded to cover the entire North American wine industry.

The company was founded by Bill Moffet in 1974, and originally published Eastern Grapegrower, a trade magazine focused on East Coast wineries.

Moffet and his wife Hope Merletti originally ran the company. Moffet, who was a grape grower in New York at the time, had a family background in journalism and he saw a need for Eastern grape growers to have a voice. The magazine evolved into Vineyard and Winery Management Magazine in 1986, and the publication expanded to serve the entire North American wine industry.

Robert Merletti, the son of the founders, now operates the company with his wife Jennifer Merletti. They are based in the Windsor offices.

Robert Merletti, whose background is in finance, oversees the strategic planning of the company while Jennifer Merletti deals with the company's day-to-day operations.

"We work well together because I'm more focused on the big picture while Jennifer is more detail oriented," said Robert Merletti.

"It takes a unique relationship to work together. Most people can't," said Jennifer Merletti. "I think that Rob looks at the bigger picture of things and I dive into the individual projects."

At an operational level, Robert is focused on strategic planning, while Jennifer manages the sales force.

Robert has been involved with the company since 1994, and has gradually assumed more responsibility for its operations. He moved from sales representative to vice president, and eventually became a managing partner. He became an owner in 2003.

During Merletti's years with the company, it has started to head in new directions.

"This company is the quintessential second generation company," he said. "The basic business started by the first generation is rock solid, and now the second generation is taking the company new places."

Those new places include expanding the trade shows and wine competitions, along with undertaking a complete re-design of the magazine.

The bimonthly Vineyard & Winery Management magazine now has a circulation of 6,800 copies, 80 percent of which is in California. The magazine has many international subscribers as well.

The publication is the largest wine trade magazine in the country. It is produced in the Windsor office, with contributions coming from writers throughout the country.

"It's not a bunch of hokey like a lot of wine magazines are," said Matt Blankenheim of Meeker Vineyards in west Dry Creek. "They are very straight forward and keep the articles focused on what I want to know."

Blankenheim singled out several recent articles that he found particularly useful.

"I really liked their story on different types of barrels, and the story about using chips versus wood (to flavor the wine) was also fascinating. It's a wine maker's handbook instead of a wine taster's."

Robert Merletti said this is what sets the magazine apart. Most trade magazines tend to just hand their content down to their readers, he said, while Vineyard & Wine Management works hard to listen to readers and to provide what they're actually looking for.

In making editorial decisions one over-arching concept applies, Merletti said. "Our focus is improving the bottom line in the profit of wineries in North America."

The company produces several other publications. One is a yearly product guide for the wine industry. It contains nearly every product supplier and winery in the United States.

There is also a wine industry phone directory which acts as the "white pages" to accompany the product guide.

In addition to the publishing business, the company produces trade shows on topics such as tasting room profitability and winery laboratories. Three wine competitions are held throughout the country. The Grand Harvest competition judges wines by characteristics specific to their appellations. The Eastern Wine Competition features wines of the East Coast and European wines. The West Coast Wine Competition features wines of the western United States, along with offerings from Canada, Mexico, Australia and New Zealand.

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