

Off to see the winemaker

By Carolyn Kaberline

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WAMEGO — If Dorothy had known about the Oz Winery in Wamego, she could have made a stop on her way to see the wizard — and she would have been in company just as interesting as those she met over the rainbow.

"We've had some who spoke only Chinese and several couples from Europe," said manager and co-owner Brooke Balderson. "There are some serious Oz fans out there."



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The names of the wines all have Oz themes, such as Witch in a Ditch and Witch Gone Good.

OZ WINERY

Address: 417A Lincoln Avenue, Wamego

Phone: (785) 456-7417

Hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday, noon to 5 p.m. Sunday

The winery, which opened last summer, carries a variety of wines with such names as Emerald City Lights, Yellow Brick Road, Witch Gone Good and Run Toto Run.

"Our two best-sellers are Witch in a Ditch and Auntie Em's Prairie Rose," Balderson said, "but I think Auntie Em's will take over when the weather gets warmer."

While Oz Winery doesn't have its own vineyard, it does get most of its makings in the area.

"We've gotten juice from vineyards near Rossville and St. George, and there are a few in the Manhattan area that we're talking to," Balderson said.

The Oz Winery is considered a farm winery, she said, which means 60 percent of its production must be Kansas grown. A bill in the Kansas Legislature this year seeks to remove that stipulation. With the current restriction, there may be years when some wines can't be made.

"The climate in Kansas is temperamental," she said. "The freeze last spring is a good example as it damaged much of the grape crop. The state did

waive the 60-40 rule, so we actually got some of our juice from other states last season."

While Balderson believes removal of the rule would allow more wineries to succeed, her business will still continue to use Kansas grapes.

"There's a real big interest in Kansas right now to get this wine thing going. In fact, before Prohibition, Kansas was the third-largest grape-producing state, so it is conducive to this business," she said. "I just think we never got caught up after Prohibition."

Although big-name grapes don't usually grow well in Kansas, Balderson said, many hybrids do; these can always be blended in with other varieties.

"This is one of the things we do," she said. "While we do have some straight varietals, we also have some fun blends, and it's the blends we can do the fun names with."

While many of the wines were named before she took over the business from her father, she said, when new names are needed "everyone brainstorms."

While the grape juice they use is purchased from nearby vineyards, wine production is done at the winery.

"We get our juice from the vineyards and currently have a bunch in cold storage in Topeka," Balderson said. "Then we bring it in here, let it thaw, and as soon as it's thawed, we start fermenting."

Last week, more than 200 gallons were fermenting in the back room, before being moved downstairs for blending and bottling. Balderson does a lot of the blending, while her co-owner, Noah Wright, is the main winemaker.

"We offer more 'entertainment wines,' not the ones that are stored for years," Balderson said.

At present it has four white wines, two reds, four red blends and three white blends with plans to add a limited-edition wine.

The store also offers food products that are either made with wine or meant to go with wine, including dip mixes and chocolates. In addition, visitors can find wine glasses, T-shirts, magnets and other souvenirs. Free wine tasting is offered daily; wine parties with cheese or chocolate can be arranged for groups.

"It's interesting working here," Balderson said. "Lots of people come in who are completely surprised. 'A winery in Wamego?' they'll ask. 'You're kidding me.'"

After the initial surprise though, Balderson said, the reviews have been positive.

"We get a lot of repeat business, and the locals all have favorites," she said.

Balderson, who has received culinary school training, soon hopes to offer facilities for private parties and add a cheese case. And since she enjoys making pastries, she said, she may one day offer "naughty sweet things" to go with the wine.

"The possibilities are endless," she added with a smile.

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