

Audio Transcript for Wines from the Amana Colonies

LES ACKERMAN - Wines from the Amana Colonies

The winemaker has to taste the wine. That's the wine that you produce. It's like an artist: Everybody gets the same colors, no two pictures are alike. And the same with wine making. Everybody gets the same juice, but every product that's produced is different because one will choose a different style of yeast, one will finish it dry, one will finish it sweet. You know, I mean, it's just there are many variables, but very simple, no high tech to it. You taste it.

I'm Les Ackerman. I live in the Amana Colonies. My wife and I run the Ackerman Winery, and this is our 32nd year. The Ackerman Winery is 54 years old, so it literally is the exact same age as I am. I was raised in the wine cellar.

Wineries in the Amanas before 1932 were typically in the basements of the church. They were allotted so much wine per individual, given out on a weekly basis. And there seemed to be a lot for everybody, so it was a very popular item.

That tradition came from Germany with the people as they brought it. Drinking wine every day was part of the German tradition. And they kept that part of it and it was kind of a unique system. The Ackermans were part of the original group that came from Germany five generations ago.

I, of course, would be the fourth generation in and my daughter would be the fifth; so in the wine business, which she is the fourth generation in and I'm the third, so we've been with the Amanas for 150-plus years. Prior to 1932 the Amanas were truly communal and every family had an occupation, and typically your occupation was the

same as your father's or your mother's. In my particular case, was raised in the Homestead meat shop. My dad was a butcher and his dad was a—and that was our family trade.

Then in 1932 when the—during the Great Depression, the communal system was going to fail, Amanas switched and made a corporation out of all the hard assets, which was the buildings, the land, and gave everybody one share of stock. Business sectors went privately, and Early Brothers opened in 1934. So almost immediately there was a winery in the Amanas, and a lot of people in the Amanas made wine in their homes in the early thirties.

My grandfather had a nice little business in his basement. So they thought that maybe they should expand that into being bonded and being—the commercial sector. So in 1954, '55—I think they were bonded in '54 and actually started sales in '55. They made their first—12 barrels was our first initial try at it. They made six barrels of rhubarb and six barrels of Concord grape. Today, 54—some years later, we do 14,000 gallons of wine and we do 22 varieties and have expanded the list a little bit.

When you've—literally, when you were playing, when you were three years old and everything was wooden kegs—of course, we used whiskey barrels in this those days. All of our basement—or in our home was—the winery was in our home in the house I still live in. It was very common for me to play amongst the barrels. I mean, I didn't think it was unusual. You know, when you grow up in it, it's not unusual. That's where I played, and Dad would be drawing off wine. And, you know, I was tagging along, and that's what I did.

I love my job. I'm thirty-two years into it. No two days are alike. We make a product that people like to buy. We've been blessed to have a successful business of which our family is part of, and I don't think it gets any better than that. When your family can be involved in your job so everybody feels the success of it, I just think that's as good as it gets.