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Richfield couple's Mila Family Vineyards brings Sonoma to Northeast Ohio after years of planning

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By [Marc Bona, cleveland.com](#)

RICHFIELD, Ohio - Winemaking requires a variety of skills, demands hard work, and absolutely pulls out every ounce of patience in those working the grapes.

Michael Oravec and Loretta DiChiro have that patience and passion.

In 2003, the Richfield couple who work in commercial real estate "kind of blindly invested in 55 acres in Alexander Valley and took it from there," Oravec said. They bought a ranch between Geyserville and Healdsburg in Sonoma County.

They didn't just sign paperwork, hire a bunch of help, and walk away. They spent a dozen years learning wine and nurturing their vines before bottling their first vintage.

"We had a passion for grenache," he said. "We traveled around and saw where all the Grenache was made and how it was made, both from a farming and winemaking standpoint and kind of crazily did our thing in Alexander Valley."

The area is mostly known for its Cabernet Sauvignon.

"We did a grant with UC-Berkeley and studied soils for three years," he said. They chose rootstock, learned what and how to plant, and worked part of a crush in South Africa.

"Part of that 16-year journey - a good half of it - was just learning," he said. "The next half was learning making wine."

This will be the sixth year they will be growing grapes. The first year, 2015, they made wine but didn't sell. The following year they began selling.

The couple is from Summit County - Oravec grew up in Copley, DiChiro went to Revere - and their Northeast Ohio home means as much as their California wine venture. Which is why Oravec calls their winery "a more Ohio-centric project even though the winery is in Sonoma."

"We're going to bring Sonoma to Ohio," he said.

(It's also the other way around: Several years ago, the couple shipped two 19th century Ohio barns to be constructed on the property, and even had Amish builders from Ohio come to California to rebuild the agricultural barn. Unfortunately, some of the timbers were lost in the 2019 fires.)

They make wines from four grapes - Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Carignon and Grenache. Their wines include a Rose (96% Grenache, 4% Carignan) and a Block 2 Grenache, which is aged 18 months in neutral French oak and a year in the bottle.

"We find our wines need time and age," he said.



Michael Oravec and Loretta DiChiro.



They sell 80 percent of their wines direct, making 2,000 cases, though they use a distributor from Cincinnati. Their wines are in [Lockkeepers](#) and [Dante](#) and are distributed in California, Ohio and Utah.

Their love affair with Grenache began when they tasted one years ago that "was elegant and powerful," Oravec said. "We also liked being different."

"We tasted all kinds of wine. We just fell in love with Grenache."

While Spanish in origin, Grenache is a backbone of many French wines and is nominal in tannins. It is pronounced gren-AHSH, or for the Spanish Garnacha, gar-NAH-cha. It is viewed as a challenging grape to grow but, as [Wine Bible](#) puts it, at its best the wine can take on "an unmistakable purity, richness, and beauty, plus the evocative aroma and flavor of cherry preserves."

"It's been a lot of fun introducing people to Grenache," Oravec said. "It goes great with food and people are figuring it out."

What people also are doing is asking for biodynamic wines, and that fits with the couple's philosophy.

"We've been biodynamic from the beginning," he said, adding several workers at the winery are dedicated to the biodynamic standards.

"Our short view on biodynamics was if you spray Roundup or chemicals on the ground then you have to spray another chemical to fertilize it and make it better, and that never made sense to us," Oravec said. "Our goal on our 55-acre property is to create its own ecosystem. We're not there yet. It's a lifetime journey and project."

Oravec travels frequently to the West Coast, and the trips are anything but drop-in visits. He's there for farming, blending, bottling and a bit of sales and marketing.

"I know the vines pretty well," he said.

"We started with the property and the dirt," Oravec said. "We started with a clean palette of 55 acres, and we cleared the land we needed to plan, we studied the soil. ... This for us is more than rolling up the sleeves. Our heart and soil is into this."

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