

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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In the five years since Duncanville native Gerald Jones hitched his wagon to the Los Pinos Ranch Vineyards as director of sales and marketing, the sleepy little winery at the back end of nowhere has experienced phenomenal growth.

“We were shipping 2,500 cases a year back then,” Jones said during a conversation on the winery’s patio Sunday afternoon. “Now, we’re in 400 retail outlets all over the state and we’re shipping up to 10,000 cases each year. We’re looking at 25 percent to 35 percent increases each year.”

Some of the retail outlets that carry Los Pinos wines are Spec’s, Goody Goody, Centennial and a lot of “mom and pop” small grocery stores.

“It’s hard to wrap my head around how to get the wine from our back door to all around the state,” Jones mused.



Jones is responsible for the marketing duties of the operation, attending festivals and wine making round tables. Both he and Sneed are sought after for their expertise.

In fact, Jones had just returned from a wine festival in Cleburne when he sat down to talk to us. He also is a part of festivals in Kerrville, Gruene, Bryan and at Grapefest in Grapevine.

Although the little winery that could has the capacity to produce up to 50,000 cases a year, Jones and vintner Jeff Sneed are proceeding with caution.

“We were close to signing a deal with a national distributor, but it fell apart when the CPAs and the bean counters took over,” Jones said. “We watched the old-fashioned gentlemen’s handshake agreement go out the window.”

Jones came to the “wine game,” as he calls it quite by accident.

After graduating from Texas Christian University with a degree in radio, TV and film, he landed a job recruiting students for Northwood University. That’s where he met his wife of 17 years, Lesa. In time, Jones found a job in film production. Although his home office was in Dallas, he spent most of the week traveling from coast to coast, along with frequent stops in Austin.



“I was traveling so much, so we decided to purchase a house in Lesa’s hometown of Gilmer,” Jones, the father of a 10-year-old daughter, noted. While they were settling in, the couple found Los Pinos – just 11 miles from their house.

Since Jones’ hobby was wine, it was natural that he would become friends with Sneed. Jones

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was tired of the rat race in the film industry and told Sneed that he'd sweep the floors or wash the windows. He just wanted to be part of the operation.

The timing could not have been more perfect, as Sneed was making an amicable break from his original business partner.

In 2000, Sneed was an Los Angeles-based architectural engineer, designing glass for skyscrapers all over the world. He said adios to the LA freeway, loaded up his pickup, two dogs and came to the East Texas backwoods to grow grapes and make a little wine.

“Jeff always wanted to be where there was water, trees and shade,” Jones said. “And, he’s always wanted to be a Texan.”

The winery and restaurant’s remote location doesn’t seem to deter guests or suppliers.

“We still scratch our heads as how the Ben K. Keith truck can find us each week,” Jones said.

From Sneed’s first small planting, the operation has grown to include eight full-time employees during the week to 20 on the weekends when the restaurant is open, and also includes two lodges on the property that rent from \$159 for the smaller one bedroom, one bath to \$300 for the three bedroom, two bath that sleeps six comfortably and features wrap around porches so guests can enjoy the forest.

“Our guests would say, ‘It’d be so nice if you just had cottages we could walk to,’” Jones said.

Sneed and his wife, Chef Dana, have built a lovely Tuscan-style villa on the property. A drawing of it can be found on every bottle of their dry wines.



The restaurant, open on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, is considering opening on Thursdays evenings as well.

“We have customers begging us to add another night,” Jones said.

He credits Los Pinos’ laid back atmosphere for a large portion of their success.

“We are an oasis for like-minded people to congregate,” he noted. “There is no pressure to turn tables like in other restaurants.

Jones also credits Los Pinos’ sweet wines for their growth.

“We call them Chateau Cashflow,” he said with a laugh. “That money allows us to focus on our dry wine projects.”

While some vineyards shy away from sweet wines, Los Pinos embraces them. It’s where most wine novices start their journey.

“We’d be fools not to produce sweet wines,” he noted. “We try to strip the pretentiousness out of the wine experience. We want people to drink what they like.”

While his customers might start out not knowing much about wine, he finds that some really get into the process.

“Next thing you know, I got ‘em coming in here in overalls talking about Chateau Margauxs, the wine cellar they just put in and asking if I think the dehumidifier they just installed is going to be enough,” he said. “I love that part of this thing.”

The Los Pinos building has just undergone its fifth remodel. In fact, some of the finishing work

At the back end of nowhere: 'Sleepy little winery' outside Pittsburg making great gains in Texas retail mar

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in the restrooms is not complete.

When asked where they'd be in five years, Jones paused for moment and said, "I see us in five years sitting down at the same table deciding if we want to do another expansion."



Los Pinos winery and restaurant are located at 658 CR 1334 near Pittsburg. They are open Friday and Saturday from noon until 11 p.m. and on Sunday from noon until 6 p.m. They do not accept reservations. To contact them, call 903-855-1769. Print out a Google map or use a reliable GPS to get there. My suggestion is to go through Pittsburg on Highway 11 and turn right on US 271, then right onto FM 3384, CR1332 and CR1334.

Google will show you a couple of short cuts through the country. The short cuts are wrong, as evidenced by our 45-minute rambling through the lovely countryside yesterday.

Please note that CR1332 and CR1334 weren't really built for two-way traffic, so take special care when you meet a car coming at you.

There are no shoulders ... what awaits you off the black top road is a ditch full of soft sugar sand.

Part two in a series exploring emerging Texas wineries.