

# Rolling Forks

## VINEYARDS



## 5 YEARS OF FINE WINES

By Kris Goracke  
Reporter

When Melanie met Joe Cihlar, he was already experimenting with winemaking, crafting batches in his basement and enjoying the chemistry behind each bottle. Then one day Joe decided to bring Melanie to Glenwood to show his hometown. One place they visited was his Uncle Brian's farm, where they spent an afternoon picking wild grapes. As they wandered the fields, Joe mentioned that if he could live anywhere, it would be on the old Peterson farm. Today, that very dream has turned into reality, Rolling Forks Vineyards now thrives on that same piece of land.

As Rolling Forks Vineyards celebrates its fifth anniversary, the Cihlars reflect on how their journey has steadily grown over time. In 2009 they purchased the Peterson farm and began exploring the possibilities

for a specialty crop. Grapes proved to be the right fit, and the couple planted their first vines in 2010 before expanding to the vineyard site in 2011. Like any vineyard, patience was key; by 2014, their grapes were being sold to commercial wineries. Now, five years after opening, Rolling Forks stands as a testament to their steady effort and the support of the community.

But simply selling grapes wasn't the dream. "We learned quickly that making our own wine was something that we could do," said Melanie. She recalled how often they would say, "Someday when we have the winery, we should..." That dream changed in 2017, when Melanie's father was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer—a moment that changed their perspective forever. "We learned that we may not have as much time on Earth as we think, and if we have a dream, we should start acting on it," Melanie shared.

In May 2019, the Cihlars broke ground on Rolling Forks Vineyards, with hopes of welcoming guests by Memorial Weekend 2020. To prepare, they froze the 2019 grape harvest, planning to start fermentation in February of the following year. "Our plan was to thaw the juice and begin the fermentation process in February 2020," Melanie recalled. "And in February of 2020 they did just that. Working side by side, Joe and Melanie crafted their inaugural batch of wine, marking the start of a new chapter for the vineyard.

Then came March 2020. "Our building was in stages of being completed by May. Then Covid hit and we found ourselves in a lockdown. At that time people were categorized as either essential or nonessential workers. We were at a standstill in the completion of our building," Melanie said. As construction resumed, the pandemic forced the Cihlars to adjust. Originally, a patio wasn't in the plans, but indoor dining restrictions made it essential. "Had it been up to Joe or me, we were ready to just pour in concrete and call it a patio. But at that time, our builder was the late Shane Blair. He said if we wanted just poured concrete, he would have nothing to do with it. So, we gave him creative freedom to design the patio. What we have today is what he designed."

That patio turned out to be a blessing. When outdoor gatherings were allowed in the summer of 2020, people were eager for a place to connect. Rolling Forks Vineyards soon became a favorite spot for the community, its story beginning during a time of uncertainty.

Over the past five years, Rolling Forks Vineyards has grown steadily through economic shifts, persevering despite the ups and downs every new business faces.

One key area of growth has been off-sale distribution. Melanie would hop in the minivan each week and knock on off-sales store's doors. "We began visiting off-sales in November of 2020, which proved to be a good time for exposure," Melanie said. "With another lockdown in place, alcohol



The Cihlar family has been operating Rolling Forks Vineyard for five years now. From left are Vinny, Henry, Melanie, Ollie and Joe Cihlar.

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sales had risen significantly."

Rolling Forks Vineyards wines are now sold in 130 Minnesota and Fargo, North Dakota liquor stores and restaurants, with expansion now underway in North Dakota.

Convincing skeptics of Minnesota wines has been part of the journey. "One of the obstacles that was hard to overcome was the stigma some have about Minnesota wines. Minnesota wines have changed and developed over the years. Many associate sweet flavors with Minnesota wines. But that simply is not true," explained Melanie.

Cold-hardy grape varieties, such as Marquette, La Crescent, Frontenac, and Itasca, now enable Minnesota winemakers to produce bold red wines. They also offer crisp whites and balanced rosés. These wines showcase quality that competes far beyond state lines.

The results speak for themselves. Rolling Forks Vineyards' wines have earned numerous awards over the years. Recently, winemaker Patricio Aravena entered their Marquette and Lady Slipper into an international contest, where wines are judged from all regions of the world. Both wines won gold medals, placing Rolling Forks Vineyards among internationally recognized producers.

Closer to home, the vineyard has also excelled at the International Cold Climate Wine Competition (ICCWC), earning three double golds, two golds, and four silvers.

In fact, the vineyard was recently featured in Wine Industry Advisor, a wine industry newspaper. The story was titled "Small but Mighty: A Minnesota Winery's Winning Streak" (August 29, 2025). The article highlighted Rolling Forks Vineyards' recognition by Wine Enthusiast and its sweep of awards at the ICCWC. Five of their wines were reviewed by Wine Enthusiast, with scores

ranging from 88 to 91 points. The 2023 Allegro earned an "Excellent" 91. The 2021 Melodia scored 90. Other highly rated wines included the Lady Slipper La Crescent (89), Frontenac Blanc Reserve (88), and Rolling Red (88).

At the ICCWC, Rolling Forks Vineyards also secured twelve medals. These included three Double Golds. Two of those were named "Best of Class." Highlights included the Allegro 2024 Minnesota Brianna (Double Gold, Best of Class), Delicato 2023 Minnesota Dry Rosé (Double Gold, Best of Class), and Lady Slipper 2024 Minnesota La Crescent (Double Gold).

As the Wine Industry Advisor noted, this recognition underscores the winery's commitment to crafting estate-grown wines that showcase Minnesota's cold-hardy grapes on a world stage.

Beyond the awards and expansion, the Cihlars credit their success to local support. "The community has been a huge cheerleader for us," said Melanie.

Rolling Forks Vineyards has become more than a winery, it's a gathering place. They have hosted the Waterama Queens Brunch for the past four years. They also created a pumpkin and sweet corn stand run by their three sons—Henry (13), Vinny (11), and Ollie (9). Soon, they will launch Fright in the Field in partnership with Fright Nights, turning their corn maze into a haunted attraction this October. For those who want to experience the 11-acre corn maze without the fright, the maze is now open.

Since opening its doors, Rolling Forks Vineyards has become known not just for its wines and beers, but also for its menu of pizzas, salads, soups, and appetizers—thoughtfully chosen to enhance the tasting experience. Building on their popularity, the Cihlars launched a wine club in 2020,



**Rolling Forks Vineyards as it looks today. The winery building also features a wine tasting room, restaurant and store. The grapes featured in the company's wine are grown on the site.**

which has grown to over 500 members and offers three tiers to suit different preferences.

Five years in, Rolling Forks Vineyards employs 35 people, mostly during the summer season. What started as a basement hobby has evolved into a thriving business, a community gathering space, and is now an internationally recognized winery.

From the first vines planted in 2010 to being featured in Wine Industry Advisor and Wine Enthusiast in 2025, Rolling Forks Vineyards' story is about perseverance, vision, and the courage to follow a dream. The Cihlars have shown that sometimes 'someday' can become today, with patience, determination, and a supportive community that celebrates together.



**Barrels of wine in the winery at Rolling Forks Vineyards. The local business has become the producer of top-quality wines and now employs about 35 people during the summer months.**