

2025
Watson Field Day

Lessons I Learned Opening
My Winery

by: Mike Gamble

1. Why do you want to open a winery?

This is the number 1 question to answer! Small business owners must be passionate about their business for it to succeed! Below are three reasons one might want to open a winery; you may have others.

- You like the challenge of making good wine
- You like the hospitality side and want a tasting room
- You like growing grapes

In my case it was the challenge of making good wine. However, for the first few years I was also trying to manage several acres of grapes owned by others. At first the romance of working in the vineyards was attractive to friends and family but that soon faded. This turned out to be just too much commitment for me so now we buy all the grapes we use from other growers.

LL#1: Do what you like and don't spread yourself too thin.

2. Business Plan

YOU HAVE TO MAKE A BUSINESS PLAN. I made my business plan in late 2017 when the decision was made to leave the winery where I was at and open our own winery. Amazingly enough, we've tracked pretty close to it. I've had to make a few updates but not many. There are a lot of business plan templates out there, pick one that fits what you're trying to achieve. A good business plan will make you address almost every issue or challenge you're likely to encounter.

LL#2: Make a business plan and set your goals.

3. Goals

Somewhere in your business plan there has to be goals. Below were our goals all of which we've meet. We met #5, however COVID and the current trend in wine consumption has made staying cash positive a challenge.

1. Have fun
2. Minimize initial investment
3. Optimize operating costs
4. Grow slowly while gaining experience and customers
5. Become cash positive by the end 2019

LL#3: Identify your goals and make them achievable.

4. Marketing Plan

So if you're going to make wine commercially, you need to have an initial marketing plan. Ours was to take advantage of what we already have. Location: Our property is one mile from a busy highway 5 miles from Round Top. Customer Interface: My daughter Ashley runs the tasting room, she's a 2nd level Sommelier, has a degree in theatre and has worked in hospitality for over 15 years. Offer a Good Product: Basically make good wine. Social Media: We use social media extensively and for the last two years we've employed a marketing company.

LL#4: Have an achievable means of marketing your wine.

5. Suppliers

It's difficult to stay in business if you don't have a good relationship with your suppliers. If any good came out of 2020 it was the lessons learned with suppliers. Before 2020 supply chains were so efficient there was no excess inventory anywhere. The pandemic disrupted supply chains in a big way! We stuck with our suppliers all the way through the good times and bad. I don't have any proof of this, but I believe most of our suppliers appreciated our loyalty.

LL#5: Develop a good relationship with your suppliers

6. Grape Growers

If you're not growing grapes then you're dependent on growers. Unless your buying grapes from large well-established growers you must get to know your growers! You must make multiple visits to their vineyards to check out progress and quality. You should also ask for their spray records to make sure they're following pre-harvest intervals for the chemicals they're using. Most of the small growers that we buy from are within a 50 mile radius of the winery. And there were times where we actually had to help pick the grapes due a shortage in pickers.

LL#6: Get to know the growers and be flexible.

7. Experience

Try to gain experience working or volunteering in an existing winery near you. You may have years of experience with five-gallon carboys and wine kits but that's a fraction of what you need in your tool kit when several tons of grapes are delivered three hours late with a temperature of 95 degrees Fahrenheit.

LL#7: if possible, gain experience by working in another winery prior to striking out on your own.

8. Oenology Education

When I started working in the nearby winery, I also started online classes at Texas Tech University for winemaking certification. That was a great idea I stumbled upon. I was able to take online classes at the same time I was experimenting in someone else's winery! I wasn't really interested in getting a certification, I just needed the basics. I took Wine Production 1 and 2 and Winery Design, Utilities and Operations.

LL8: Get Educated