

## **The Roanoke Times**

October 5, 2002

### **The Grapes of Success in Botetourt**

By Keisha Stewart

Her parents have grown grapes in Eagle Rock for more than a decade, and now Kimberly Kolb Eakin has gotten into the retail side of the business. Eakin has opened Wine Gourmet, selling wines from California, Italy, Spain, Chile and Virginia, including the Rebec brand that uses her parents' grapes. Growing up on the farm and vineyard, "I understand wine from the ground up, literally," Eakin said.

Wine Gourmet, located in Daleville at the Botetourt Commons strip center along U.S. 220, specializes in highly rated wines costing less than \$12. Rebec Vineyards, Peaks of Otter Winery, AmRhein's Wine Cellar, Chateau Morrisette, Afton Mountain Vineyards and Valhalla Vineyards wine brands make up Wine Gourmet's Virginia section. The store sells micro-brewed and imported beers, and wine complements such as cheeses, olives and mussels, along with wine glasses, wine holders, wine stoppers and other wine accessories.

On Saturdays, Wine Gourmet holds wine tastings. Eakin's parents are in their 18th grape-growing season at their 300-acre Botetourt County farm, with 10 acres for grape growing. Barbara Kolb-Holaday and James Holaday, both teachers, operate the commercial vineyard - one of a handful in Botetourt County - growing riesling, pinot noir and gewurtztraminer grapes that go into Amherst County-based Rebec wines.

Kolb-Holaday said Eakin's experience on the family farm - planting, preparing and picking the grapes - has given her a "good, honest agricultural background." "She really appreciates the product," Kolb-Holaday said.

Before opening her wine shop June 1, Eakin, 34, of Roanoke, served in the U.S. Army as a Russian linguist and an instructor and shooter on the all-army pistol team for 12 years. Eakin, a senior sergeant and marksmanship instructor, is an active-duty Army reservist. After the Army, Eakin worked as a paralegal and a part-time employee at Lee & Edwards Wine Merchants in Roanoke.

Eakin wants her store to be the answer to baffled shoppers in the wine aisles at grocery stores. Printed cards at Wine Gourmet guide shoppers with the 1 to 100 ratings (100 meaning the best) from Wine Spectator magazine, well-known independent taster Robert Parker Jr., or personal notes from Eakin or Wine Gourmet's manager, Gordon Kendall, a wine educator.

Eakin, Kendall and other employees act as wine consultants to customers, who often seek their advice in choosing wine. The store has a database of customer purchases. If a customer likes a wine that he or she has previously purchased, but forgets its name, employees can look it up in the database. "What we try to do is match up the wines with people," Eakin said. Knowing a customer's taste is a skill Eakin wants to hold onto as her business grows. Eakin said she already has regular customers, and even remembers their preference. "We may not know their name, but we know what wine they drink," she said.