



After retiring from U.S. government jobs that took them all over the world, Peter and Rebecca Thieme are building a life as vintners.

## Brightest Star in the East Texas Sky

**THERE'S A DAZZLING STAR IN THE SKIES OF EAST TEXAS**, and it shines brightly over a vineyard in the gentle dales of the Winnsboro countryside. Once upon a clear Texas night, this star was spied by Peter and Rebecca Thieme as they enjoyed an evening with family while brainstorming names for their winery. As Peter gazed upward, the Italian phrase for beautiful star, *bella stella*, popped into his head. He thought it was a fitting name for a winery in the Lone Star State. All of the family agreed, and Bella Stella Winery was named.

While branding of the winery came from the heavens, the development and construction was more earthbound and lengthy.

Rebecca, originally from Stephenville, and Peter, from Mannheim, Germany, met in Temple on a blind date. They married in 1981 and have spent most of their marriage traveling the world in support of their U.S. government careers. Peter ran U.S. Army and Air Force exchange services, commonly known as PXs.

Rebecca worked in human resources for the civilian personnel office and defense security services. In these jobs, they worked in far-flung locales including Alaska, Germany, Greenland and the Middle East. They also spent quite a bit of time in the Lower 48. In all, they moved 14 times during their married life.

Their U.S. assignments allowed them to tour the countryside. As they traveled in Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina and Arkansas, they visited and enjoyed wineries, particularly those that specialized in wines made from the fruit of the muscadine grape. "We were hooked once we tasted muscadine wine," Peter says. The idea formed to build a vineyard after retirement. "We like to say we've gone from government to grapes," he jokes.

With retirement not far off, the Thiemes started taking trips from their home, then in New Jersey, to scout locations. "First off, we knew we needed to go to areas in the southeastern United States with climates that supported muscadines," Rebecca said. "And then we narrowed it down to Tennessee and Texas. Texas won out, well ... because it's Texas!"

Initially, the Thiemes began looking for property around Mount Pleasant, Sulphur Springs and Pittsburg but didn't find a match for their criteria. They'd just finished a site-hunting trip to Texas when they received a call from their real estate agent, saying that a property in Winnsboro had just hit the market. Because they were not in a position to travel right back to Texas, they called Rebecca's sister and asked her to go check it out. She did, and she reported that it was a keeper.



Upon entering and seeing the elegant bar and white linen-covered tables, it's easy to forget that Bella Stella was once a farmhouse.

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The Thiemes bought their Winnsboro countryside house and 10-acre property in March 2008—becoming members of Wood County Electric Cooperative—and began planting their muscadine vineyard that December with rootstock from Texas and Georgia. Of the more than 300 varieties of muscadines, the types grown at Bella Stella are supreme, Carlos, noble, Pam and Isons. They’ve also added some new varieties of wine grapes that they will incorporate in the future, including Black Spanish, Norton (Cynthiana) and Blanc du Bois. The first fruit formed in 2011 when the plants matured, and in 2012, they had a full harvest of grapes.

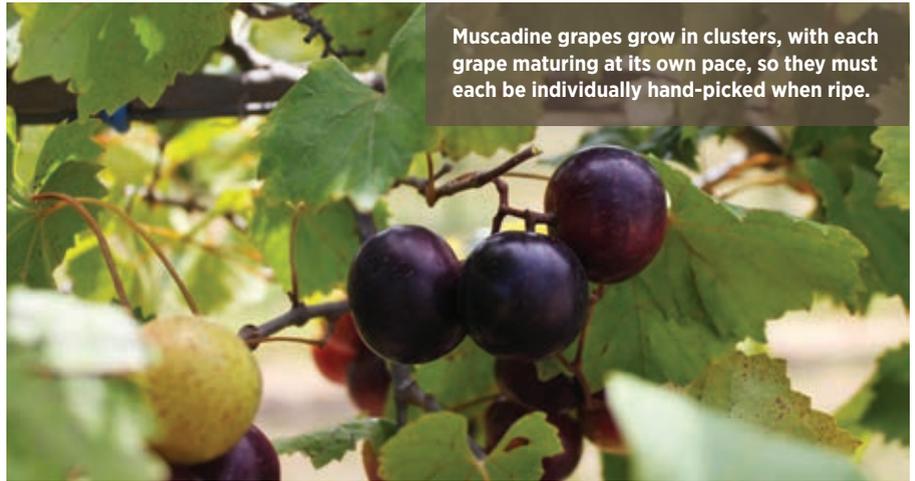
Grapes grow and are harvested in two ways. One way is in bunches, and the harvester snips off the entire ripened bunch of grapes, at one time. The other growth pattern is in clusters, which is how muscadines grow. Cluster grapes ripen at different times over a period of weeks.

Therefore, the grapes must be individually hand-picked. In a season, one mature vine can yield up to 50 pounds of ripe fruit. At Bella Stella, most of the harvesting begins in the blistering months of August and the first weeks of September.

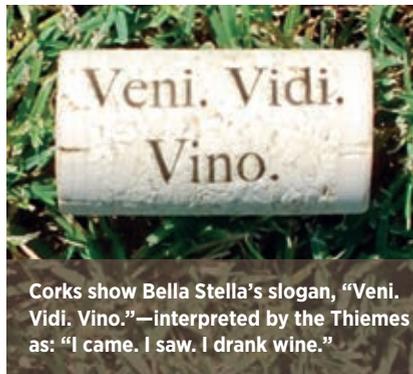
After the fruit is picked, it must be sorted, crushed and pressed. The Thiemes are making three muscadine wines: a red, a white, and what they call a “blush medley,” which is a mix of red and white. Both the red and the white are named Sirius, a nod to the famed brightest star of all.

After harvest, the winemaking processes vary for red and white wine. To make red wine, the grapes first are gently crushed, and then the whole grape, skin and all, is put into an open fermentation barrel. The contents are exposed to yeast to begin fermentation, and the skins remain to impart the red color. During this process, the winemaker must punch down grapes that have risen to the top, forming a cap. This is an important step to mix the grape solids with the juice. The winemaker decides after hours or days whether the desired color and flavor has been reached.

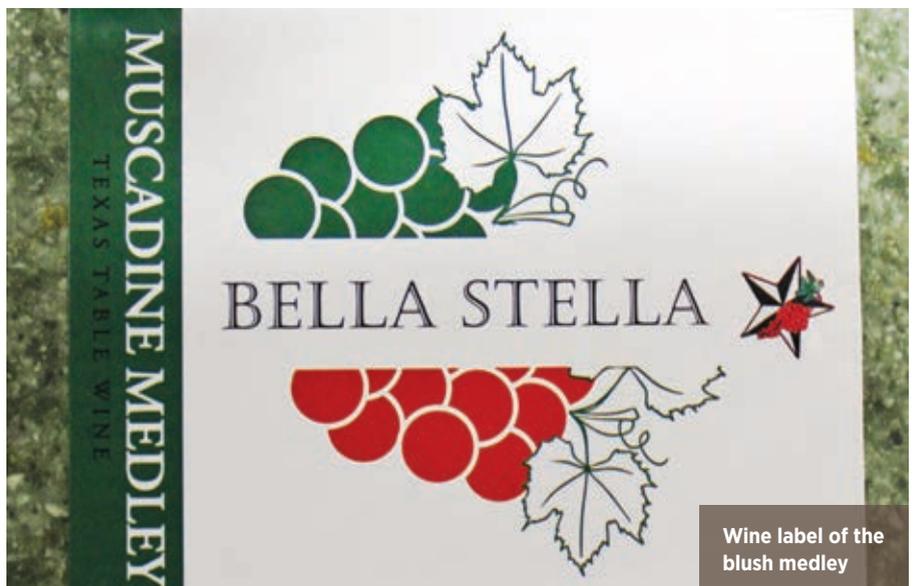
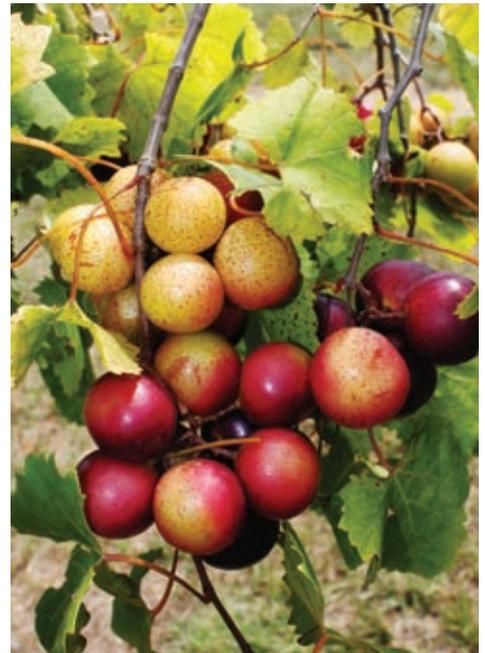
The liquid is then removed, and the solids, called pomace, are sent to the



Muscadine grapes grow in clusters, with each grape maturing at its own pace, so they must each be individually hand-picked when ripe.



Corks show Bella Stella’s slogan, “Veni. Vidi. Vino.”—interpreted by the Thiemes as: “I came. I saw. I drank wine.”



Wine label of the blush medley

press to squeeze out the remaining juice. All of the juice is then put in an air-locked tank to complete fermentation. "Oxidation is the enemy of wine," Peter says.

At Bella Stella, wines are racked several times, moving them from one tank to another to clear sediments. After filtering, the wine is carefully bottled, making sure there is no air contact so the wine can be stored at optimum flavor for years. The white wine process is similar, but the grapes are crushed and pressed and the skin discarded before the other steps continue.

For Bella Stella's first bottling in 2013, the Thiemes used Dixie Wine Company near Jacksonville to finish and bottle their wines. They wound up with about 100 cases, or about 1,200 bottles of wine. They've now invested in all of the equipment needed to process and bottle wine themselves, from crushers to tanks to wine analysis equipment and a labeling machine. Therefore, the 2015 harvest will be completed from start to finish at Bella Stella. Their ultimate goal is to produce 1,000 cases a year, or 12,000 bottles, which Peter says is standard for a small winery.

Peter and Rebecca have been studying and researching winemaking for many years, and Rebecca is receiving formal training at Grayson College, where there is an extensive viticulture (the study of growing and selecting grapes) and enology (the science of winemaking) program. The program is two years long, and she hopes to gain a better understanding of chemistry, testing and tasting. She also is intent on learning about bouquet, aroma and some of the techniques sommeliers use to pair wines and make recommendations, so she can be more knowledgeable to assist Bella Stella's customers choose wines.

Since 2008, as the Thiemes had been building their vineyard, they'd also been keeping an eye on the 50 acres across the road for possible acquisition and expansion. They told the owners, the Harts, they'd like first dibs if there were ever plans to sell. That inquiry led to their owning the plot and a farmhouse. With a fair bit of remodeling, the house is now a comfortable and picturesque wine-tasting and dining venue.

The Thiemes give son Jonathan, daughter Shannon and her husband, Mike, a fair amount of credit for the success of the operation. "They have helped with everything," Rebecca says. Jonathan lives in Oregon but helps with marketing and business aspects. Shannon and Mike have jobs that keep them in Addison, but they spend as much time as possible at the winery. Rebecca says they've been instrumental in all aspects of the growth of the business, including branding, Internet development, menu design and good, old-fashioned grape picking. Although the Thiemes were planning on serving only light food fare and tapas at the winery, the kids (maybe after some more family stargazing) talked them into serving full meals in Opa's Kitchen.

Peter is the chef, and he creates authentic Bavarian dishes from family recipes. "It's turned out very well. It's a niche. Peo-

ple can't get German food around here," he says. While Peter runs the kitchen, Rebecca helps out with prep work and does all of the baking. She also runs the front of the house, greeting and seating guests, operating the wine bar and pitching in wherever needed. They also perform back-office duties including account-

ing, purchasing and inventory, supplementing the restaurant staff with three part-time local hires for wait staff.

The menu includes wiener, jager, and ziguener schnitzel (tenderized chicken or pork), or kassler (smoked pork loin) and wurst (German sausage) platters, to name a few. Desserts include apfelstrudel, chocolate cake and gelato. In addition to their standard menu, there are specials, such as stuffed peppers, crab cakes, beef tips or ribs, cooked with

German flair. The restaurant serves wine, coffee, tea and soft drinks, as well as 100 percent muscadine juice. They also carry an extensive wine list from other Texas wineries and offer dessert wines to finish.

Standard hours for Bella Stella and Opa's Kitchen are Friday and Saturday from 4 p.m. to 9 p.m. and Sunday from noon to 3 p.m. Dining reservations are not necessary but encouraged. If you are interested in just the wines, the Thiemes offer several flights, along with individual tastings. Wines can be purchased by the bottle or case during operating hours or by appointment. Bella Stella also hosts special events and ships wine to Texas residences.

The winery's guest book comments prove they're appreciated. "So much fun!" "Friendly and delish!" "The Wursts!!!!" One fan exclaims, "5 Stars!"—a testament to the results of the Thiemes' farming, remodeling, academic studies, winemaking, sommeliering, cooking and accounting duties.

As Rebecca says, "We said we wanted to keep busy in retirement." That's what happens when you wish upon a Texas star.



Opa's Kitchen serves German-style fare.

**BELLA STELLA WINERY**  
 879 CR 4440  
 Winnsboro, TX 75494

**HOURS**  
 Friday: 4-9 p.m.  
 Saturday: 4-9 p.m.  
 Sunday: Noon-3 p.m.

bellastellawinery.com  
 facebook.com/BellaStellaWinery  
 (903) 975-0020

# Adult Students: Get \$2,000 for Tuition

**SCHOLARSHIPS TOTALING \$6,000 CAN BE EARNED** by adult students who are Wood County Electric Cooperative members through the Power Upward scholarship program. This program, introduced last year, expanded upon an already robust scholarship program that WCEC has in place for high school students.

With increased numbers of returning adult students entering colleges and trade schools, Power Upward serves to help a few members reach their educational goals. The scholarships can be used to enter a college or trade school; pursue a master's or doctoral degree; or earn a certificate or license, such as to become an electric lineman, electrician, heating and refrigeration technician or cosmetologist.

"We recognize that any educational undertaking, especially as an older adult, takes an enormous commitment," said WCEC Debbie Robinson, CEO and general manager. "This program is designed to help these deserving members reach their goals while also easing the financial burden. Once these students attain their goals, we hope they will use their newfound skill sets to enhance their work efforts in our communities to benefit us all."

The Power Upward program comprises three scholarships of \$2,000 each. Qualified applicants must be 21 years old or older and must be active members or member spouses living on the system. Adult children of members do not qualify.

The qualifiers cannot previously have won a scholarship from WCEC. They must be accepted into a college, trade school or another postsecondary program, and must be registered for a minimum of nine credit hours.

Members who wish to apply should submit a completed official application with two current letters of reference and a 500-word essay describing the following:

1. Reasons for continuing your education.
2. Why you have chosen your particular field of study.
3. How it will help you with your future goals.

The deadline for applications to arrive at the WCEC offices is November 18, before 5 p.m. Applications can be mailed to: Attention: Scholarships, Wood County Electric Cooperative, P.O. Box 1827, Quitman, TX 75783, or be completed and scanned as a PDF and emailed to: [info@wcec.org](mailto:info@wcec.org), with "Scholarships" in the subject line. (The deadline is not a "postmarked by" date, so please allow extra lead time if delivery is by mail.) Late or incomplete applications will be disqualified.

Applications will be judged and scholarships awarded by the end of the year. Applications are available on [wcec.org](http://wcec.org) under the Community Programs tab, or by calling the cooperative at (903) 763-2203.

## SAVE THE DATE

We hope to see all WCEC members at the

# WCEC 77<sup>TH</sup> Annual Membership Meeting

Friday, October 9 | Noon

Governor Jim Hogg City Park, Quitman

**ENTERTAINMENT AT NOON • MEETING AT 2 P.M. • PRIZE DRAWING TO FOLLOW**



## Wood County Electric Cooperative

501 S. Main St. • P.O. Box 1827  
Quitman, TX 75783

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Debbie Robinson

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## Contact Us

### CALL US

**(903) 763-2203**

### EMAIL

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### OUTAGE HOTLINE

**1-866-415-2951**

### FIND US ON THE WEB

**[wcec.org](http://wcec.org)**

### MEMBER BENEFITS AND SERVICES

- Online account access and bill payment
- Paperless E-Bill services
- Free bill-paying app
- Visa, MasterCard, American Express and Discover accepted
- SmartPower prepay electric system
- Scholarships and youth programs
- Safety and energy conservation programs

### MOBILE CONVENIENCE CENTER

**Monday**, First Methodist Church, *Van*

**Tuesday**, Family Dollar, *Mount Vernon*

**Wednesday**, City National Bank, *Hawkins*

**Thursday**, Brookshire's, *Winnsboro*

**Friday**, Economy Drug, *Grand Saline*

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