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MAKING A DIFFERENCE...DAILY

## Fenwick man proposes Grape and Wine Learning Network

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During his 30 years in the grape-growing consulting business, Kevin Ker has heard the same questions again and again.

How do I drive a tractor? Organize a winery? Navigate the complex Liquor Control Board of Ontario system?

Most grape growers, winemakers and wine retail store staff don't want to spend the time taking a lengthy course at a university or college or troll the Internet for hours to find the answers, Ker said.

Many don't have the money to spend on extensive training, either.

So Ker has come up with an alternative he's dubbed the Grape and Wine Learning Network -- the subject of his PhD dissertation in educational studies at Brock University.

The network would be a place for peers in the wine industry to learn from each other.

The goal is to focus on real world, practical wine and grape issues, not academia, Ker said.

It could be a spot where someone like winemaking pioneer Karl Kaiser, co-founder of Inniskillin Wines, could share his knowledge of icewine production. Or an experienced grower could share the best techniques of reducing pests in the vineyard.

"They want real-life situations," said Ker, who runs KCMS Applied Research and Consulting and who spent years interviewing growers, wine producers and retail staff to find out their needs.

"They want real life applications, and they want people who are actively involved to instruct them."

Exactly what form Ker's network would take is still to be decided. That would be up to the key institutions, organizations and agencies that handle grape and wine issues to figure out, he said.

Bodies such as Brock University's Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute (CCOVI), Niagara College's wine program, the Grape Growers of Ontario, the Wine Council of Ontario and the LCBO could take the lead.

But the Fenwick resident said he doesn't want any one group to own and operate the network, but rather it to be a collaboration between them.

"The irony is they all need to work together to survive but they're all competing with each other at the same time. It's the bridging of information."

One example he cites is creating a young winemakers network to set up a series of learning forums with seasoned winemakers.

The wine learning network would especially benefit newcomers, who need a broader understanding of the wine

world, said Ker, a CCOVI fellow.

"It's not a widget," Ker said of the wine industry.

"It's an uncontrolled environment that deals with something new. So how do we adapt to it?"

Ker said his idea seems like common sense, but no one else has put it to paper before.