

Putting down roots

By JIM SULLINGER

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Four newcomers to the local wine industry:

■ David Naatz

Naatz of Riverwood Winery gave up the legal profession to grow grapes and make wine.

But he got into it by accident.

Wanting to buy a farm in the country, he found property near Weston.

"Unbeknown to us, it had grapes on it already," Naatz said. "It was abandoned, and everything was overgrown. When I started to mow, the grapes popped up. They're tough old things."

Naatz decided to grow grapes and make wine as a hobby. Now four acres are planted, and Naatz has a full-time business with a gift shop, banquet area, tasting room, production area and a small auditorium — all in an old schoolhouse on the land.

■ Rick and Debbie Hird

Just this spring the Hirds planted an acre of vines south of Lawrence in an area known as Pleasant Valley. It's near another small vineyard that was planted last year.

They're envisioning a Kansas version of Napa Valley, the famous California wine region.

■ Kerry and Michael Amigoni

There's even a local winery opening by Oct. 1 in the stockyards area of Kansas City. The Amigonis plan to make wine on the first floor of the Livestock Exchange Building and open sometime this fall. They will truck the grapes in from a 3½-acre vineyard in Centerview, Mo.

"We wanted to be an urban winery," Kerry said. "Why not just bring it to the consumer?"

■ Colleen and Jason Gerke

"We've had people calling us wanting to get our wine in their restaurants just because we're local," said Colleen Gerke. She and her husband, Jason, will sell their Jowler Creek wine for the first time this year.