

'Jaw dropping' sales at Two-EE's

BY BRIDGETT HERNANDEZ

For IN Fort Wayne

Indiana's efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19 have put a cork in the state's \$9.3 billion tourism industry, forcing local wineries to pivot their business model from a primarily in-person experience to curbside service and online orders.

For Eric Harris, who owns Two-EE's Winery in Huntington with his wife, Emily, that means their winery resembles an Amazon warehouse right now.

"I've never seen so many boxes going out the door," he said.

The winery is still open for curbside ordering, noon-6 p.m. Friday-Sunday and 4-6 p.m. Monday-Thursday.

"We tried to pull as much intel as we could from the folks at Chick-fil-A on their drive-thru and apply that to what we're doing here. It's worked out quite well," Harris said.

In fact, the demand for Two-EE's carryout wine slushies has been "jaw dropping," he said. While the carryout sale of the sealed frozen drinks has always been an option, wine slushies to go are not something the winery has promoted because they are better enjoyed on site, Harris said.

That changed when on-site service was prohibited for the foreseeable future due to Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb's order to slow the spread

"They say it takes a village to raise a child, but it takes a vineyard to homeschool a kid."

— Seen on Facebook

of the coronavirus.

"We don't want people to go without something they love so much for an indefinite amount of time," Harris said.

A portion of the sales from wine slushies is going toward a fund to help support winery employees who aren't working at this time. While Harris hasn't had to lay off any employees, some members of his staff have voluntarily gone to no hours to reduce their exposure to the virus.

Jennifer Lutter, who owns Country Heritage Winery in LaOtto with her husband, Jeremy, has also lost employees due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While they were able to keep their full-time employees, they had to lay off members of the part-time staff.

With the winery's on-site business on hiatus, Lutter said they have offered members of the tasting room staff an opportunity to get some hours by learning about other areas of the winery. The downtime has allowed them to spend a little more time on education and team

building while also practicing social distancing.

"They've been helping us go through our spring pruning and helping us bottle and learning some different aspects of the winery, so they have a lot of great information to share with everybody when we do get to open back up on tours and when they're working the tasting bar," Lutter said.

Country Heritage remains open for curbside pickups of wine and food, including its wood-fired pizza. The winery is also offering free shipping for orders of four or more bottles of wine.

"The community has supported us greatly and our carryout's been doing fairly well," she said.

Harris said he also sees this time as an opportunity to get organized, do some deep cleaning and get around to maintenance projects. Two-EE's recently started a loyalty program and plans to launch a wine club in the near future.

"Those are all things that we would have never had the time, energy and resources to be able to focus on if we were trying to run the on-premise portion of the business," Harris said.

He has also enjoyed spending more time with his family.

Shane Christ, wine maker at Satek Winery in Fremont, has also found time for projects to enhance the customer experience.

Treats to try

Two-EE's Winery, Huntington

twoees.com

- Wine slushies in flavors like Plonqué, margarita and kiwi

Country Heritage Winery, LaOtto

countryheritagewinery.com

- Seasonal wines back for a limited time, including Jolly Juice, Winter White and Spring Blossom

Satek Winery, Fremont

satekwinery.com

- Satek Winery's signature chocolate sauce paired with raspberry wine

try to keep things in perspective. We're not saving lives here. We are making and selling wine, so that's the approach we took," he said.

Christ said he feels fortunate to work in an industry that is resilient, even amid a pandemic. With families cooped up and parents working from home while also homeschooling their children, it's nice to have some wine around to take the edge off, he said.

Harris shared a similar thought, recalling a quote he saw on Facebook: "They say it takes a village to raise a child, but it takes a vineyard to homeschool a kid."

Another good reason to raise a glass is to support local businesses, Christ said.

"Food and beverage drives economies," he said.