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Scientist, Farmer, Artisan

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SCIENTIST, FARMER,
artisan

Alum turns math and science into wine.

BY KELLEY BRUSS

*TJ Fleming '10 prunes
grape vines in winter, one
of his many duties
as vineyard manager
at Rocklands Farm Winery.*





Fleming and another winery employee sample one of Rocklands Farm Winery's white wines.

TJ FLEMING '10 *used to talk about making wine after he retired. He got about a 40-year jump on that.*

Fleming is the vineyard manager and head winemaker at Rocklands Farm Winery in Montgomery County, Maryland. In 2017, the winery produced 50,000 bottles of wine and cider. Before Fleming arrived in 2012, making wine was a basement hobby.

"At the beginning, it was just him with the vines by himself," says his wife, **Bethany Fleming '11**.

Even now, with a small team, the work challenges him physically, mentally and creatively. He's struggled in the past with his enthusiasm outpacing his focus.

"I need a box in order to get anything done," he says.

Building a winery out of all but nothing seems to be that box.

"He's a super part of the team," says Greg Glenn Jr., CEO and cofounder of Rocklands Farm.

Fleming's science and math training is on display in formulas on the winery's whiteboard. He keeps a face-mask-style hat tucked in the pocket of his barn coat for winter work in the vineyard. He is part farmer, part businessman, part scientist. But ultimately, he is making wine that customers love.

Science applied

Fleming came to Furman from Florida with a plan to study physics. But when he almost failed Calculus II, he had an epiphany: "Maybe I'm not going to be a physicist."

He shifted toward earth science and hit another wall. "I'm not about rocks, but I like earth science," he told his professors. With their help, he created an individualized curriculum program that he called environmental communications.

"There's going to be a market for people who know about science in the next 30 years," Fleming says. "That was the extent of my plan."

Enthusied by his undergraduate thesis on green homebuilding, he was accepted into a graduate program in architecture. But his wife received an offer from Urban Teachers, a program that would pay for her master's while she taught in a Washington, D.C., school.

The finances made their decision simple. The Flemings moved to D.C., where Bethany began her program, and TJ found a job teaching at a private school in Maryland.

"Not a lot of people want to teach middle school science and math," he says. "I liked the relationships."

Through school connections, Fleming met Greg Glenn Sr., who had bought a 34-acre

former horse farm in 2003. In 2010, his son, Greg Glenn Jr., and two friends started Rocklands Farm with a mission to nourish and engage the community. They began raising cows, chickens, lambs and pigs in their pastures and selling the meat in their market.

The property comes by its name honestly.

"It's horrible to farm," Fleming says with a laugh, "so we decided to start a vineyard there. That's fun, to pound posts into rock."

Glenn Sr. was experimenting with making wine in the basement of the century-old farmhouse but had been unable to get any fruit from his half-acre of vines.

"His problem was, he couldn't grow grapes," says Fleming, who took a plant science class at Furman, complete with a weeklong unit on wine and beer.

"I knew a little bit about growing grapes," he says. "I was looking for a side gig."

Fleming taught during the week, read books about winemaking in the evenings and spent weekends coaxing the Rocklands vines back to health. Bethany Fleming remembers helping with the first harvest from that original half-acre.

“We probably didn’t even get half a ton, but we were so proud,” she says.

In 2013, Fleming took an online wine-making course through the University of California-Davis, “the Harvard of wine” in the United States, he says. That year, he processed 9 tons of fruit in the basement.

The following spring, construction started on the Rocklands Farm Winery — and the private school where Fleming had been teaching closed. He became a full-time farmer and winemaker.

Days on the farm

The main entrance to Rocklands is dominated by a symmetrical brick house and a weathered barn that has become a popular wedding and event venue.

Fleming points out the springhouse, the smokehouse, the corncrib. But he’s most proud of his “toys,” the pricey pieces that have increased productivity as the winery grew: a narrow tractor to fit between the rows of vines, a steam cleaning cart for the tank room, a wine press with an inflatable bladder. The press paid for itself in a year by increasing production from 150 to 170 gallons per ton of grapes.

Fleming’s work cycles with the seasons — pruning in the winter, tractor work in the spring, spraying in the summer, wine-making through the fall, bottling in early winter.

His goal is to use only Mid-Atlantic grapes in Rocklands wines. The vineyard, planted in stages over the last several years, should eventually provide about 40 percent of the fruit he’ll need.

For now, Fleming drives a refrigerated box truck around

the region during harvest, buying fruit from other vineyards.

He could hire a driver, but he wonders if any driver would share his passion for the cargo.

Trying harder

The weather in suburban Washington is no friend to a farmer.

“Some weeks you’re living in a jungle; other weeks it’s dry,” says Fleming, who battles fungus, insects, raccoons, opossums and the occasional skunk. And for a people person, the long hours alone are a challenge.

“Farming is lonely work,” Fleming says. “I listen to a lot of podcasts.”

Bethany Fleming has watched him pour himself into the vines.

“And then things out of your control dash those hopes, and you have to adjust your expectations and problem-solve,” she says.

But once he’s in his box, Fleming can’t help pushing himself.

“I like to try harder. That’s my personality.” ●

“THERE’S GOING TO BE A MARKET FOR PEOPLE WHO KNOW ABOUT SCIENCE IN THE NEXT 30 YEARS,” FLEMING SAYS. “THAT WAS THE EXTENT OF MY PLAN.”

