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Sports gave Cheshire vintners a competitive edge in business

BY MARK JAFFEE REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

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CHESHIRE – A casual conversation around the family swimming pool led to a part-time business that has since grown into a multimillion-dollar endeavor for six members of the sports-minded Votto family.

Since its inception in 2009, Votto Vines Importing – based in Hamden with a 20,000-square-foot warehouse – has not only become a major wine distributor in the region, it has gained a fine reputation for being a family-run business.

Forbes magazine featured the business in 2015 as one of the Most Promising Companies in America.

Votto Vines has proven that to be true with expansions, now including warehouses in Massachusetts and New Jersey and an office in midtown Manhattan, and rapid growth in revenue from \$100,000 the first year to more than \$50 million in 2020.

Cheshire's Michael Votto, 43, joked that just like in "The Godfather," he is "the head of the family."

The former Cheshire High football and basketball standout is CEO and president of the company, who dreamed up the idea after vacationing in Tuscany with his wife, Amanda.

Votto said the company's success relies on the vast expertise of his entire family, including brother Nicholas, an outdoorsman and European traveler; cousins Peter, a mechanical engineer by trade, and Stephen, chief financial officer, and brother-in-law Jeremy Jerome, a real estate appraiser by trade.

There's also Leah, the sister of Peter and Stephen, whose background is in public relations and sales. Michael's dad, Mike, has a manufacturing background and is the business adviser and confidant.

Mike Votto is close friends with Paul Pasqualoni, the former Syracuse and UConn head football coach. They were in the same 1967 Cheshire High graduating class and coached together at Cheshire in the early 1970s.

The younger Vottos and their brother-in-law played football for the Rams. Michael was a key part of the 1994 and 1995 undefeated state championship teams as a receiver, defensive back and punter. He also was a standout basketball player and went on to play basketball at Union College.

Later, he became a graduate assistant with the Orangemen football team, overseeing their players' tutorial sessions, while attending law school in upstate New York.

How did his sports background help shape his professional career?

"Sports gave me a competitive edge, mental toughness and spirit that has helped me tremendously now," said Votto.

Stephen Votto was a hardnosed tailback for the Rams.

"The commonality of all of us is that we are all hard workers, all passionate about business and in all that we do," said Stephen, an economics major at Union. "Our personalities and areas of expertise are different. Mike and Peter are more risk-takers and more aggressive in financial matters than I am. I'm more conservative and a numbers guy."

As a senior thesis, Stephen drew up a business plan, learning all of the aspects of the wine industry, with a marketing strategy for a startup.

"My palate was not for wine, but more for business," he said.

On the other hand, Michael's late grandparents, Frank and Gloria, both had strong family roots in Italy and an appreciation for wine.

Nicholas Votto started delivering the product in the back of his Subaru.

"I was working at a local outdoor retailer, Trailblazer, a New Haven staple for many years, during the first few years of the wine business," he said. "I always loved to travel, primarily for rock climbing and big mountain skiing, but the wine business expanded that. Italy and Spain are the primary destinations as well as throughout the U.S. I've done around 25 trips to Italy and planned many honeymoons, tours and even weddings."

But the prospect of working with his brother and cousins and uncle was too good to pass up.

“It does not come without challenges,” added Nicholas. “The major challenge with Michael is that he comes from a corporate law background, where 60-hour weeks are commonplace.”

Frank and Gloria Votto instilled a sense of Italian heritage. Frank was a traveling cigar salesman and influenced his grandchildren’s strong work ethics.

“My grandfather and grandmother always encouraged us to follow our dreams, as did our parents (Mike and Nancy) and my cousins’ parents (John and Brenda), and that’s what we are doing, and we’re doing it all together,” said Michael. “That’s how blessed we all are.”

Cheshire sports family turns to wine



Cheshire natives run a family-run wine distribution business (featuring five cousins and a brother-in-law). It began in 1999 and is now based in Hamden, with other warehouses in suburban Massachusetts and New Jersey and a midtown New York City office. Revenue last year topped \$50 million.

Michael Votto

Age 43; CEO, president; Union College, 2000 grad, European History degree; Syracuse Univ. School of Law, 2003; Cheshire High, 1996

Nicholas Votto

Age 37; Senior vice president of marketing and agritourism; Univ. of Vermont, 2005 grad, Natural Resources degree; Cheshire High, 2001

Stephen Votto

Age 35; Chief Financial Officer, Union College, 2008 grad, Economics degree; Cheshire High, 2004

Peter Votto

Age 38; Chief operating officer; Trinity College, 2004 grad, Mechanical engineering; Cheshire High, 2000

Jeremy Jerome

Age 41; senior VP of distribution and sales; Plymouth State, 2002 grad, business; Cheshire High, 1998

Leah Votto

Age 33; director of PR, senior sales rep., logistics; Connecticut College; Cheshire High grad.

Web site: vottovines.com



Back row (from left): Nicholas Votto and Peter Votto; Front row: Jeremy Jerome, Michael Votto and Stephen Votto