



## June 30, 2020 Transcript

*Kenn Sarr of Starr Hill Vineyard & Winery is interviewed by  
PA Wilds Ambassador Josiah Jones from Visit Clearfield County.*

**Josiah:** Hello, this is Josiah Jones from Visit Clearfield County, serving as a PA Wilds ambassador for the Wilds Are Working series. I am joined here today with Kenn Star from Star Hill Winery. Welcome, Ken.

**Kenn:** Thanks. Always a pleasure to talk to you, Josiah, and the Clearfield County crew.

**Josiah:** Yeah! We've been talking quite a bit these past two weeks. You know, it's great to have you with us to share how you are pivoting your company amid these uncharted times. Just to get started, Kenn, can you tell us a little bit about your winery?

**Kenn:** Sure. We were established October 2005 in Curwensville, Pennsylvania. We're a manufacturer of wine, over 30 different types of wines. We have about five outlet store locations that folks can purchase our product through. We have a new product we just brought out, a fermented fruit product that is in cans. And it gets us into a different market prior to the COVID going on. You know, we were according to the governor an essential business, which means that we could stay open. We did have some challenges with employees and such to do that. But we were open. But much like most wineries, our winery started with a passion. My dad started making wine with his dad in the 50s. He was in the Air Force, stationed in Germany, and so he saw how they made wine over Germany. [He] came back to the United States here and when he was done with his tour and he and his brother started making wine in 1967. We have the original bottles on the top shelf here at the winery. So it all started with a passion. Our main business was a financial service business. When my parents had purchased 14 acres from a client of ours, then in the mid 90s, early 90s I guess it was. At that time we planted 12 vines to see if they would grow here in Curwensville. Now we have over 3000. We ranked about, a couple years back, the 23rd largest producer of wine in the state of Pennsylvania. There's over 300 of us. And it's all produced right here in Curwensville. And we have it, again, the new product that we just brought out, which is a Bumpershoot, in cans. So that product is a fermented fruit product, and it's able to be sold at beer distributors. It's a brand new market for us. So always promoting the county and where we're at. We've been doing that since 2005.

**Josiah:** Very cool. Thank you for sharing. And thank you for sharing your new product too because I'd like to try that out. It looks like it will be quite tasty.

**Kenn:** The girls tried a little bit when they were over here.

**Josiah:** Yeah. I know they did. Yeah. They've been liking going on that little tour themselves.

**Kenn:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Josiah: I mean just to continue on: why did you decide to start a business in the PA Wilds area?**

**Kenn:** Well, early on I can remember, you know, 2000-- maybe 2006, because we got licensed October 2005, which is, you know, towards the end of the year. Somewhere around there, we had gotten a call from the PA Wilds group way back when about joining the Wilds and I'm like, 'what the heck is this thing going on?' You know, this was a few years back and we said, 'yes, sure! Yeah, I mean, if you're going to promote us, we'll promote you. And so we jumped on early on. But the PA Wilds, in my opinion, is pretty pivotal in tourism in Pennsylvania. As a winery, we are a tourism entity. In Pennsylvania over a million people visit PA wineries. One of the reasons why we did open up is to bring people from the outside area to come into our area, which is Clearville County and Curwensville. And through the many years we've had people from all over the world that visit the winery that normally would never have a footprint in Curwensville, Pennsylvania. That being said, we've brought film crews in from Hollywood. We've had TV shows filmed here at that winery, the Fireball Run, which you can see on Amazon. So that's brought more people into our area that normally would never been here? Marcos Pontes, an astronaut from Brazil, was here. You know, he would never come to Curwensville on his own, right? But now, when someone mentions Pennsylvania, I know that he mentions our name. So it's bringing people from the outside area, bringing them inside here, showing them what we have here in our area. And I think the more the better.

**Josiah:** Yeah, I want to just say thank you for being a tourism attraction in Clearfield County. I always love to bring people over there from out of the area, special travel writers, because you're such a good host. And, you know, and they appreciate and, you know, I do as well. So, again, thank you for being part of the PA Wilds.

**Kenn:** We like to give them a little gift, which they seem to really appreciate, which includes Visit Clearfield County and us as a winery as a keepsake that is special just to them. And we enjoy doing that.

**Josiah: Yeah, it's really cool. Thank you. So how are you pivoting your operations during this crisis?**

**Kenn:** Unlike a lot of the businesses in PA, you know, as the winery, we were deemed to be open and as an essential business. The impact, big impact, in I would say a positive way, a negative and positive, but, you know, we had some things that changed in our industry, which was the liquor stores not being open. Of course, people being at home, not traveling around. No one's really visiting the winery itself, although with our stores located inside of Wal-Mart stores, you know, the grocery business was very busy. People were still buying food in the TP and everything else that was going on. And so that part of our business did increase quite a bit. And we actually started changing our mode of sales and such prior to the COVID, you know, hitting, with online

sales that we did with partners with our reno shipper, which we're able to ship to 38 different states. So we had that set up on our website, starrhillwinery.com. So if they wanted to ship directly to them, we were able to do that. But we didn't have to develop a system; it was already in place prior to when that was going on. I think moving forward, a lot of the businesses -- like ourselves and everyone else -- have to do a little bit of a change to meet the goals and meet the requirements necessary to stay open. So in our stores and when it first happened, when we were Yellow, even when we were Red, we were still able to be open. So the challenge we had was, although we were able to be open, some of our employees didn't feel like they should come into work, so a couple of our locations were closed. We did change our hours. We did have where they can purchase it over the phone. We would drop it off in our back door. We had no tastings at any of our stores. Now that we do have tastings available, we have them like at the winery. There's only two who can taste at a time at our tasting area. So, you know, it's a different mindset that we have, and I think that mindset is going to continue, unfortunately, for a period of time, better or worse. And, you know, we're gonna have to go through some changes.

**Josiah:** Yeah, sure. I mean, you know, that's the great thing about what you guys do there, Kenn, is that you guys are always ahead of the game and always trying something new. The online shopping was something a lot of people had to add to their business because the COVID-19 guidelines and the pandemic itself.

**Kenn:** Yeah, I think our online business prior to that was ... We were busy ... But at that point, it increased probably 125 percent. But we are shipping out daily, multiple orders every single day. Every morning we would get online orders coming in. So it was different, you know, for us, because we had then changed our whole packing area downstairs, so we've moved things around and production for that.

**Josiah: How are you staying in touch with your customers at this time?**

**Kenn:** Well, like we've always done.... We have a large database of customers that we've had throughout the years that we have that we send out emails. We're on, of course, Facebook. We do Instagram. So all the socials were on. We try not to bombard anyone at any time. So once a month, we'll do a newsletter; we'll shoot it out. If there's something coming up, we'll do it, you know, maybe twice a month or so. We had our first outside event here prior, which was our trivia night. We held that outside with distancing, and it worked out well. Everyone seemed to be happy; they're happy to get out. So that worked out nice.

**Josiah:** Great! I know you got a trivia night into the Clearfield Arts Studio as well.

Yeah. We were the adult beverage cast at Liberal Arts Studio, Clearfield. And they had a great setup. It worked out well. They had it positioned nicely; I, actually, liked the way they had it set up; it was a little bit different than the first time we were there. So everyone is changing, molding themselves into, you know, what needs to be done in all our small businesses one way or the other. We have to either make the change somewhere along the line to keep things going. So that's what we're trying to do.

**Josiah: That's great. What operational pivots or approaches will you continue as we move into recovery?**

**Kenn:** What do we do? What would it be like? What do you mean?

**Josiah:** Well, I guess like, whatever you did that was new during this time to kind of push you ahead or keep you going. You know what I mean? I know you mentioned you already had the online shopping and everything like that, but there's something you may have had to change during this crisis.

**Kenn:** Well, like everyone else, you know, the wiping of things down, sanitation, masks, purchasing masks, purchasing sanitation products, which were tough to find. So, you know, we had asked our employees, if they do have something, please wear their masks. At one time when it first broke out, you know, you couldn't get anything. Now it's a little bit easier. I think as we move forward, the way we're doing business will probably continue that way for some time. And the distancing, the mask wearing; I mean, I know some people think that, 'I'm not wearing a mask. Why do I need to wear the mask?' I think it's something that we just need to do. I mean, some people get mad. 'I'm not wearing that mask out there.' You know, 'Why should I wear the mask?' Why not? You know, we have we have a sign. Your option is you don't have to wear the mask, but you don't necessarily have to come to us, into our public place, if you don't have one on. So some don't really make a difference. They say, 'I don't care,' and just come in. We're just, you know, we're requiring folks to come in, make sure they wear the mask. It's protection for our employees and themselves, really.

**Josiah: Sure. So are there any programs, resources or organizations out there that you've found helpful during this time and you'd encourage other small business owners to check out?**

**Kenn:** Well, we had constant emails from not only yourselves at Visit Clearfield County, Local Chambers and the Clarion University -- Corey Riley has been very helpful. They're always sending stuff out. Also, the Pennsylvania Wine Association, which we're members of this large organization in Pennsylvania. They have been very helpful, especially early on in the COVID. And we were in this Red, this Yellow, some were Green. Some people really didn't know what that meant. And not only the individuals, but enforcement didn't really now. And I'll give you a perfect example for us. Early on, one of our locations in Johnstown, which is Cambria County... Saturday morning, I'm at the house. I get this call that came through my home phone. And we still have a landline; you know, most don't have a landline. So this call comes through and it says Cambria Police. I thought, 'what in the world? Someone trying to sell me something. I'm not picking that phone up.' So I let it ring. Sure enough, they call back again. I thought, 'Gee, what the heck are they selling?' So the third time I pick it up, and, here, it's the Cambria Police Department. And they said they were at our store inside Johnstown. And they said that we had to close down... because we weren't on the list of essential businesses that were deemed to be open. Well, per the governor, now, I think ... they were in Red maybe at that time or something. I think that's what it was. And they were checking, doing what they should be doing, checking to make sure that everyone is compliant and what's going on, which I appreciate them doing that. But after talking to the officer, I tried to say, 'listen, I know we're not on that list because we're already supposed to be open.'

**Josiah:** Right.

**Kenn:** It was towards the end of the day and I said, 'OK, we'll close down.' And so we did.... And I was just on the phone with Senator Langerholc's office, talking about the same situation the night before. And I called their office just to tell them what was going on. And I had to get, for myself, trying to figure out, well, are we supposed to be open, or are we supposed to be closed. And sure enough, you know, we were supposed to be

open. But I reached out to PWA and they confirmed that. And, of course, we were back open again, and we don't have any issues. But a lot of the law enforcement on a local level and the Pennsylvania State Police actually regulates the wineries. So that was the local level, trying to do their job, doing the best they can. But you know it was all right with us. I mean, that shouldn't be the issue.

**Josiah:** Good story.

**Kenn:** So, yeah. We stayed open and we haven't had any issue with anyone other than that.

**Josiah:** That's not too bad.

**Kenn:** Yeah.

**Josiah:** Yeah. Did you have any silver linings in this awful situation?

**Kenn:** I think, you know, for us in the alcohol business and the way that state system was set up, you know, our silver lining is we actually got -- probably because we're in multiple convenience stores, Snappy stores, Nittany Minit Marts, Martin General, Giant Eagles, a variety of different areas -- for us, we were able to reach out to different market that we wouldn't have been able to reach before. So it was, and because of some of the advantages through the state and in the US with payroll and such, that helped us on our end even because we were able to use that for [things] that anyone else in small businesses would use them for. So I think probably new customers helped us in this. We're probably a little bit different than some of the other businesses that had to close down. But it was tough for us. Not as tough as most small businesses, but we're thankful for our customer base in the Wilds and folks like yourself trying to get the information direct to the small business and tourism entities to make sure they knew what they needed to do.

**Josiah:** All right, Kenn. Well, thanks again for your time, appreciate you coming on here for the interview.

**Kenn:** Well, thank you. It's always a pleasure. Stop by any time. You can come by and see the canning system that we have. We have an in-house canning system, so that was a purchase through -- if anyone is familiar, Jack's Hard Cider. So we purchased their canning line. We have that right in line. So we're doing tours and such here at the winery.

**Josiah:** Awesome. I'll be sure to stop in and check it out. Thanks again,

**Kenn:** Sounds great. Thanks a lot!

**Josiah:** And for those watching this interview and other resources for small businesses in the PA Wilds can be found at WildsCoPA.org. That's where you can apply and share your story as well, just like Kenn Starr did here for Starr Hill Winery. Again, thank you, and signing off.