

Immersed: Places of Miracles - Viticulture - S1E1

CHRIS ZINSLI: You're listening to Immersed, the show where we take you deep inside the world of a game.

SUZANNE ZINSLI: I'm Suzanne Zinsli.

CHRIS: And I'm Chris Zinsli.

SUZANNE: This episode, we're going to learn about Viticulture, the strategic game of wine-making.

CHRIS: Villa Milagro is a vineyard and a winery in western New Jersey. It overlooks the Delaware River, across from Pennsylvania. It has a driveway that's so long that people driving there sometimes think they made a wrong turn. The owners even put up a series of signs along the drive with snippets of poetry, like those old Burma-Shave billboards: "The cliffs are steep. The water cold. Drive safely. To where wine is sold."

SUZANNE: All that's to say that Villa Milagro is a pretty remote place, especially for New Jersey. It's a hundred-and-four acres. There are green fields with trees along the edges, rolling hills on the horizon, grape vines in nice neat rows. You come around the bend and there's a picture-perfect farmhouse.

CHRIS: So when you finally arrive at the vineyard itself, it makes total sense that the first thing you hear is this. [*hawk sounds*] When I got there and heard that, I immediately grabbed the recorder and starting scanning the sky. I wanted to catch a glimpse of whatever bird was flying overhead. A hawk, I thought.

SUZANNE: But it turns out there weren't actually any hawks. Those sounds were just a recording being played over loudspeakers, a security system to scare away other birds and keep them from eating the vineyard's grapes. Audrey Gambino runs Villa Milagro with her husband Steve, and she's the chief winemaker there.

AUDREY GAMBINO: We get a real kick out of our customers who come in and say, "Wow, you know, this is really a dream life, how lucky you are to have it." And we do share that sentiment. But it's also a damn lot of hard work.

SUZANNE: Villa Milagro is a very small business. It's never produced more than a couple thousand cases of wine a year. That's mostly by choice. Of its 104 acres, Audrey says only 10 are set up for growing grapes. The business has had a few ups and downs over the years, including twice when it came close to closing up for good. But we'll get back to that soon.

CHRIS: In 2013, the game Viticulture was released by Stonemaier Games. It's a strategy game where players can get a taste of what it's like to run a small but growing winery.

SUZANNE: The setting is a rustic but scenic vineyard in old-world Italy.

JAMEY STEGMAIER: I wanted to pick a theme that was pleasant. Pleasant and universal.

SUZANNE: That's Jamey Stegmaier, the game's co-designer and publisher. We talked to him at the Gen Con 2018 convention.

JAMEY: I wanted something that I thought that people romanticized. Romanticized the idea of running a vineyard, but in real life they don't actually want to do that. So just something that they might want to do.

CHRIS: Jamey says he didn't know a lot about wine-making before he started designing the game. But he had done some "research" himself years earlier.

JAMEY: I wish I could say it was some very professional part of the research process, but more it was about me being in my early 20s and wanting to hang out with my friends and just have a good time at a vineyard. So it was drawing on some experiences a few years, I think I designed Viticulture when I was around 30, and this was, I'd made the visits a few years before that, just to go drink at a vineyard.

CHRIS: I mean, we're all about research here. So clearly we had to go "research" this for ourselves.

SUZANNE: I took a trip to Villa Milagro this past fall with a couple of my girlfriends, and I've got to say, the wine is amazing. And when you're at the vineyard, drinking the wine and chatting with friends, it is so easy to get totally wrapped up in the romantic side of owning a winery. On the surface, the story of Villa Milagro is a lot like the story of an imaginary winery in Viticulture. Audrey and Steve started out with little more than a plot of land in 2001, and they've gradually built it up over the years.

CHRIS: They expanded their tasting room. A few years ago, they built a separate mixing facility with climate control. (It's cleaner than the barn they used to use.) Last year Steve built a pergola so that customers can sit outside and enjoy some food with their wine when they visit. In Viticulture, a key way that players expand their business is by building new structures. You can build a tasting room, or a larger wine cellar.

SUZANNE: You also can grow your business in the game by hiring additional workers. Those workers are how you take actions in the game. More workers means more actions, which means you can do more things. Villa Milagro also has expanded its staff over the years.

CHRIS: They hire seasonal workers to help with things like picking grapes during harvest season. That's when we visited.

ROGELIO VELASCO MARTINEZ: I'm just using my hands, my fingers.

SUZANNE: That's Rogelio Velasco Martinez. He originally came to work here on an agricultural worker visa.

CHRIS: Now he's a permanent resident of the U.S. and he's the winery's assistant winemaker and vineyard manager.

SUZANNE: That day, he and the rest of the crew were doing some of the hard and messy work that you don't really have to think about when you play Viticulture. They were picking grapes by hand and collecting them in bright yellow totes. Later they would haul off the bins to weigh the day's harvest.

CHRIS: The bees were out in full force that day. There were so many, hundreds it seemed like, that I was nervous even recording there. Oh, and those fake hawk sounds turned out to be less than totally successful this year. Some birds had eaten some of the grapes before they could be harvested.

SUZANNE: And there was another challenge that was facing the vineyard.

AUDREY: If you look closely at the fruit, you can see this kind of coat, it almost looks like a little brown, fuzzy, white coat. That's some mildew that's on the fruit itself. So we'll be rinsing some of that off before we process it, so that we don't get any off flavors into the wine.

CHRIS: Dealing with mildew and mold has been a fact of life for the vineyard since its earliest days. When Audrey and Steve started out, they planned on making the entire business organic: no pesticides, nothing artificial. But they soon discovered that mold was ruining their crops. Even worse, it couldn't be controlled with organic solutions.

SUZANNE: They faced a hard choice: Give up on organic, or give up entirely.

AUDREY: So we made a determination in that year, since we could not find a certified organic fungicide, that we would give up our certified status and instead use some non-certified fungicides, which we've been doing since. And we try and not have it overtake the vineyard as it once did, and we've been very successful since we started using the non-certified fungicide.

SUZANNE: Mold turned out to be only the first major hurdle that the business would face. A few years later, an even greater threat would arrive.

AUDREY: We began to notice in 2009 that there was a change that was happening in our climate here: wetter, a little bit warmer, crazier summers, a few more deep cold winters, and that had not been the pattern before 2009.

SUZANNE: This came to a head just a few years ago.

AUDREY: What we noticed was this deep cold that was settling in, and everybody in the news was talking about the polar vortex.

SUZANNE: You remember this, right? When it kind of felt like the meteorologists were just making up new terms to get people interested in the weather?

CHRIS: But it was a real thing, and it was a serious threat to crops in this part of the country.

AUDREY: By the middle of January we were pretty concerned because we had already seen a couple of minus-16 nights, and we knew that the type of vines we had really would not withstand that kind of cold. So we were not in a good position at that point, and then as those nights continued to be very cold, and we were hit with three more minus-16-degree nights, we knew that we were in trouble.

SUZANNE: The cold weather stayed in the region all the way through March. It was such an unusual event, that the vineyard memorialized it with a picture.

AUDREY: There's a photo on the wall of our wine tasting room that was taken on March the 23rd, and there's a foot of snow on the ground in my vineyard, and it's frozen solid. You can't stamp your foot through the top of it.

CHRIS: The ground was frozen through, likely killing many of the vines from below. But still, the staff held onto the faint hope that the vines had somehow been able to make it through the winter.

AUDREY: So when spring came, instead of pruning as we usually did, we waited to see if there was any green out there, and there wasn't much, because there was not much that was still alive.

CHRIS: Growers across New Jersey were hurt. Certain grapes that were native to the East weathered the harsh winter better, and certain kinds of hybrids made it through fairly well.

SUZANNE: But the types of grapes that grew at Villa Milagro were among the hardest hit. Yet again, Audrey and Steve were faced with a difficult decision.

AUDREY: We had to decide again are we going to pack up our bags and leave or are we going to dig our heels in and make this work.

SUZANNE: They decided to dig in. Literally.

AUDREY: So we pulled the vines that were obviously never coming back. We cut a lot of the vines down to just above the graft joint to see if we could get some return growth. And we've started planning, and did do some re-planting, because it was pretty clear that, for example, the shiraz was 100% dead, it was gone. So we knew we were going to have to pull it, so we just went ahead and pulled it, and got some grape vines a little bit late in the season but got them so that we could get those in.

CHRIS: When Villa Milagro uprooted a huge portion of their vineyard, it was a matter of necessity. But for players in Viticulture, uprooting a vine is an opportunity.

JEN KOLLER: And the, I'm sorry, Two and four, two and four, I'm harvesting. And then I'll crush. I'm gonna crush you, man! I'm gonna crush you!

LASZLO KOLLER: I'm gonna harvest the same field. Done.

SUZANNE: You're listening to a four-player game of Viticulture. That was Jen and Laszlo Koller.

CHRIS: Right now, one of the other players, Matthias Bonnici, has produced less wine than any of the other players. He's particularly worried about Alison Cardinale, who is trailing him in points but has a large stock of wine in her cellar.

SUZANNE: But Matthias just played a card...

MATTHIAS: Horticulturalist...

SUZANNE: ...that allowed him to uproot one of the vines that he planted earlier in the game. That made room for a new and better vine, and it got him two bonus points. Later he would plant a new vine in place of the old one, and his new harvest would be stronger than it was before.

CHRIS: That gamble, choosing to uproot, almost paid off for him. He would go on to lose the game to Alison by a single point. But if he hadn't been able to sell some of the wine that he made from the grapes that were produced by those new vines, it wouldn't have even been close.

MATTHIAS: And then I do it again, so that's a one...

SUZANNE: The thing that makes Viticulture the game different from running a real business is the same thing that makes it pleasant to play. Nothing in the game ever really sets you back. You might make bad decisions, but you aren't ever punished for them too harshly.

CHRIS: But also, your crops are never wiped out by forces that you can't control: birds, mold, frost.

SUZANNE: For Jamey Stegmaier, the designer, that was a conscious decision. Early in the design process, the game had elements where players had to worry about things like the weather and soil quality. But he worked on the game, and he trimmed it down. He focused only on the elements that created a certain kind of experience, one that was more like the romanticized version of winemaking that he saw when he was a visitor.

JAMEY: I mentioned the word pleasant earlier, and that's definitely part of the experience that I was aiming for. I want people to have a pleasant experience when they're playing the game. It's also a game that's all about progression. You're always moving forward in your vineyard. You're drawing in more types of visitors, you're building permanent buildings that improve the vineyard. Your grapes and your wine are always aging. The experience that I was aiming for is that players always feel good when they're doing things in Viticulture.

SUZANNE: You might have to change your plans when you're playing game, but you never have to start over from scratch. Let alone twice. Back at Villa Milagro, the vineyard is still recovering from the polar vortex. In recent years, the winery has had to buy grapes from other vineyards. They've had to supplement their own harvest so that they can make enough wine.

CHRIS: But things are now getting back on track.

AUDREY: We're completely replanted now, so the vineyard is full. If you look at it you see there's a vine everywhere. There's one or two missing here or there, but we really have full growth at this point.

SUZANNE: The name Villa Milagro roughly translates as "place of miracles." If everything goes well, it'll be producing wine at full capacity by 2021. We'll be back after the break to talk more about Viticulture. How the game changed even after it was published. That's coming up.

SUZANNE: One of the things about running a wine business is that different owners focus on different things. Lots of vineyards make and sell wine, of course. But some focus on selling grapes and don't make much wine themselves. Some really emphasize tourism and running lots of events.

CHRIS: After the first edition of Viticulture came out, some players pushed that approach as far as they could. Jamey Stegmaier again.

JAMEY: Well, one of the most common stories I hear, the one that I don't want to hear, but the that one I hear the most is, players being very proud that they played the game without making any wine, and still did very well in the game. That's a built-in part of the game, that is perfectly fine. I am more excited when players create some beautiful wine in the game and actually use

that wine. But it's neat for me to see that players can push different buttons in the game and have their own unique experience throughout.

CHRIS: In 2015, Stonemaier Games released an updated version of Viticulture, called the Essential Edition. One of the changes for that edition was that players were required to actually have wine in their cellar before giving a tour, if they want to get the bonus point that comes with it.

JAMEY: And so that way, even if a player goes after a point-heavy strategy, they need to make wine at least once and be familiar with that. And part of that is just to make sure players know how to make the wine. I think sometimes on your first play, there's so many steps that go into it. You've got to build a structure, and then you've got to plant a vine, and then you've got to harvest that vine, and then you've got to turn that into wine, and then turn in a wine order. There's so many steps, that sometimes players just are like, I want to ignore that for this first play. That element encourages players at some point to at least give it a try so they know how to make wine in the game, in the game of winemaking.

CHRIS: Gamers will often try different strategies to push the limits of what's possible in a game. And in real life, people will try out all sorts of different business strategies to find their own niche. So it's appropriate that early players of Viticulture did what they did. In fact, it might have been just a little *too* true to life.

SUZANNE: Immersed is produced by Cardboard Edison. Find out more about the show, and a lot of other things that we do with board game design, at cardboardedison.com.

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SUZANNE: Music credits are available in the show notes.

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SUZANNE: I'm Suzanne Zinsli.

CHRIS: And I'm Chris Zinsli.

SUZANNE: And join us next time as we become immersed in another game.