

Thousand Islands Winery continues rapid growth

Alexandria Bay--The Thousand Islands Winery is entering its third year of operations. It is situated near the Thousand Islands Bridge and the New York Information/Welcome Center, located just off Interstate 81, Exit 50S on Seaway Avenue. The winery is New York's most northern winery and is now a member of the Lake Ontario Wine Trail.

The winery continues to grow at a rapid pace, and business has increased more than 400% from last year. The winery opened in July 2003 with a starting inventory of 1,300 gallons of wine, consisting of five varieties. Steve Conaway, the winery's president, had planned to increase wine production to 5,000 gallons in 2004 and add an eighth type of wine, called North Country Red.

His goals were significantly exceeded. In 2004, the Thousand Islands Winery wine production surged to 11,000 gallons and now offers nine varieties. The winery hopes to add a new variety this year named Alexandria Bay Rose.

Two acres of vineyards were planted in April 2003, made up of 14 different types of cold hardy grapes. The winery has determined that the Frontenac, Beta, Elvira, Kay Gray, and Valiant grape varieties favor the growing conditions of the Collins Landing area. More vineyard acreage will be planted at the farm on Seaway Avenue in May. Eventually, an additional 10-12 acres of vineyards will be added.

"There are just not enough local grapes to meet the current demand," states Steve Conaway. Steve is also the president of the newly formed Seaway Wine and Viticulture Association. This group consists of about 12 local individuals who meet monthly to continue establishing local vineyards in Jefferson and St. Lawrence counties. The Thousand Islands Winery plans to buy every grape that can be locally produced for the foreseeable future, Steve says.

Kirk Reynolds has joined the winery team as the new winemaker. He is originally from the wine country in the Finger Lakes area and has extensive experience in winemaking. After serving four years in the Army at Fort Drum, he completed two combat tours in Afghanistan and is now a welcome new addition to Alexandria Bay.

Frank and Michele Mayer plan to relocate from New Jersey to Clayton this spring. Frank will become the vineyard and maintenance supervisor and Michele will become the winery's sales manager.

Currently, the winery operates year-round and has two permanent full-time positions. During the warmer months, the winery's employment will increase to seven full-time positions and 10 part-time jobs. Eventually the winery hopes to increase to six permanent year-round positions and increase seasonal employment by two full-time and 15 part-time positions each summer.

Thousand Islands wine is sold locally at the winery's tasting room and is also available at liquor stores located throughout the North Country, Syracuse, and Rochester. From spring through fall, the winery participates in farmer's markets throughout the North Country conducting wine tastings and offering wine for sale. Some of these farmer's markets include Alexandria Bay, Cape Vincent, Clayton, Carthage, Gouverneur, Lowville, Massena, Oswego, Pulaski, Rochester, Syracuse, and Watertown.

As the Asian economies continue to benefit from the trade surpluses with the United States, Steve Conaway is seeing a huge business opportunity opening up wine sales in Hong Kong and China as they begin to have higher levels of disposable income. He is tapping into his recent military contracting experience that he gained while serving during the war in Uzbekistan, Khazistan, and Afghanistan. He is currently negotiating with an Asian wine importer in Hong Kong. If a deal can be reached, the Thousand Islands Winery would be the first New York winery to export to Hong Kong, with expected potential growth into the Chinese market in Shanghai.

Recently, direct shipment of wine to consumers' homes has been an important political issue throughout the United States. The Thousand Islands Winery ships its wine both in-state and out-of-state, available based on current state laws at time of shipment.

Technology is an important component of every modern business. Wineries are no exception. The Thousand Islands Winery has a website on the World Wide Web located at www.thousandislandswinery.com.

Pictures of the winery, planned events, wine lists, sales locations and many other facts about the winery are listed. The website is constantly updated and maintained. The tasting room has modernized its cash register system in 2004 to increase checkout efficiency and the winery invested in a state-of-the-art computer system with label printer. The winery can now produce specialized wine labels for special

occasions, weddings, and personalized touches.

Free winery tours and wine tastings are available daily at the winery. Upon request, special winemaker's barrel tastings are available for groups of six or more. In June 2004, the winery expanded into its new tasting room located in the front of the barn. Further expansions for 2005 include completion of a new production facility and expanded banquet area.

The Thousand Islands Winery also caters to the needs of the North Country's home wine-makers with a wide range of home wine-making supplies.

This year the Thousand Islands Winery will host the following events: May 29, winery concert; June 18, music in the vineyard concert; July 23, second annual winery birthday bash; Aug. 14, music fest and pig roast; Aug. 20-21, battle of the bands; Sept. 4, Blues at the Winery; Sept. 17, Artists at the Winery; Oct. 1-2, Oktoberfest and Harvest Festival; Nov. 19, art show; Dec. 10-11, Deck the Halls Ornament Collecting.