

COMMODITY REPORT

Cold-hardy grapes an enduring crop

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While much of the economy has struggled to regain balance, one region's product has shown its ability to endure through it all—the cold-hardy grapes of the Thousand Islands Region.

The grapes, which were introduced into the region about ten years ago, are able to endure colder climates of up to 40 degrees below zero and have also been able to thrive and bring an economic boost within the industry.

Originally, it was thought the region could not grow grapes due to the harsher climate than that of the Hudson Valley, Finger Lakes, and Long Island wine regions. In 1999 Stephen Conaway, a former military officer, knew there was potential for growth and began researching different varieties. After spending five years in the wine region of Germany, Conaway felt that the Thousand Islands Region had potential similar to where he had been spending his most recent tour of duty. Through his research he found that the University of Minnesota had great success in developing varieties that are cold hardy in not only the regions of Minnesota, but also Quebec.

In 2001 Conaway was deployed to Afghanistan, but did not delay in his process to bring a wine region to the Thousand Islands. While deployed, he worked with his wife to purchase a former dairy farm and upon his return in 2002 they were able to convert the 28 acres into their winery, "Thousand Islands Winery," which now encompasses 38 acres near the St. Lawrence River. Initially, he worked with about 14 varieties, however through time only a few endured, which included Frontenac, La Crescent, Frontnac Gris, and the newest being Marquette. In 2009 the winery produced 37,000 gallons of wine and employed 32 people during their peak time.

Growing days continue to be similar to that of other wine regions, but days are colder in the North Country, thus creating the need for stronger, heartier grapes. The

biggest threat also continues to be a late frost in May that could damage the entire crop for the year. Despite these risks, Conaway continues to expand on his journey.

"The best part is being able to put an old farm back into production," said Conaway. "Just seeing the fields come back to life, watching the tractors running and the people working—it's incredible."

Not only creating success at his winery, Conaway obtained assistance from another local establishment and was able to form the "Seaway Wine & Viticulture Association," which works closely with Cornell and now has approximately 50 members.

Conaway further worked to get a wine trail established and with the sponsorship of state Senator Darrel Aubertine and support of the New York Farm Bureau, a bill was passed to designate a portion of the state highway system as the "Thousand Islands - Seaway Wine Trail" with about 52,000 visitors coming through this past year.

Jim Trezise, President of the New York Wine & Grape Foundation, said, "I never would have thought we would have a wine industry in the Thousand Islands Region. They have been very astute in researching and the owners work together really well. They are off to a great start and have a bright future ahead of them."

The New York Wine & Grape Foundation is able to provide funding for the wine trail and helps to the extent they can with legal documents, connections to regulatory agencies and offering assistance with business plans.

While much of the economy took a downturn this past year, including a large loss in tourism in the Thousand Islands Region, the wineries of the region were able to gain a tremendous profit and become the net for the tourism sector. Only second in the region to "Boldt Castle," the wine industry has proven themselves to be as hardy and viable as the grapes themselves.



STEVE CONAWAY, left, cellar master Josh Wansha, maintenance manager Don Warren and Brianne Conaway, age 5, get ready to press grapes in an old fashioned bladder press.

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In the news

Cold-hardy grapes proven to make good wine

Can Northern New York farmers grow cold-hardy grapes and make commercial quality wine?

Results of Northern New York cold-hardy wine grape variety trial research funded by the Northern New York Agricultural Development Program and Cornell Cooperative Extension Northeastern New York Commercial Fruit Program say yes.

Trial data is now posted on the Northern New York Agricultural Development Program Web site at www.nnyagdev.org.

In 2005, Cornell University Extension's Northeastern New York Commercial Fruit Program established a 300-vine vineyard at the E.V. Baker Agricultural Research Farm

in Willsboro, to evaluate 25 different cold hardy wine grape cultivars.

The Northern New York Agricultural Development Program, seven local grape and wine producers, the Lake Champlain Grape Growers Association, the Cornell Grape Program, the Cornell Wine Analytical Lab and the New York Farm Viability Institute all participate with this Willsboro Wine Grape Trial project.

Project leader Kevin Iungerman, a Cornell Cooperative Extension tree fruit and grapes educator, said, "Commercial wine grape production and the making of quality wines from grapes grown in Northern New York are quite attainable by agricultural entrepreneurs in the Upper Hudson and Champlain valleys of New York State."

— NNYADP