

New Multicounty Agent To Focus On Grape Production

Precise Variety, Exact Location Components To Successful Pa. Wineries

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LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.)
— New Penn State Wine Grape Agent Mark Chien wants to see more grapes being grown in Pennsylvania.

But first, potential growers have to get beyond the "myths" about grape growing for the table or the winery.

"There's a sort of 'romantic' notion about vineyards and wineries that they attract an inordinate amount of attention," said Chien. "Not only from politicians — in terms of legislation and funding — but also from consumers, tourists, and others."

Chien knows that there are many areas that can be found in the southeast part of the state suitable for growing. But traditionally, at least from his experience as vineyard manager in Oregon, growers have been successful in other fields first, as doctors, lawyers, and even movie stars.

But the southeast can be particularly successful, according to Chien, the new wine grape agent appointed by Penn State Cooperative Extension in the past week to serve Lancaster and the southeast and southcentral counties. It's home to one of the largest tourism industries in the country — perhaps the largest on the East Coast. And "wine districts" become destination areas for the metropolitan tourists — they spend money and go to tasting rooms and "usually buy quite a bit of wine," he said.

When Chien began working in Oregon in 1985, there were about 3,000 acres in vineyards. He worked in the Willamette Valley on the west side of the state, in Salem, Ore. There were no cooperative extension agents serving the winemaking or grape growing industries. When he left a few weeks ago, the industry grew to encompass 10,000 acres in a rich, fertile region settled by farmers who traveled the Oregon Trail.

Southeast Pennsylvania is home to only about 1,000 acres of grapes for winemaking. In the state, about 11,000 acres are dedicated to process grapes, mostly in Erie County.

But the Southeast Growers Association (SEGA) recognized the marketability of the area to vineyards and called on Penn State.

Penn State quickly responded and hired Chien to serve what is perceived as a potentially huge growth industry.

In Salem, Ore., Chien managed a 220-acre farm with 100 acres devoted to wine grapes. The former walnut farm also was home to Christmas trees and timber products.

For some time, Chien studied viticulture at the University of California at Davis, in the graduate horticulture program. But an opportunity opened up on a farm in the northern fork of Long Island, N.Y., Pindar Vineyards (named after a Greek poet), a 220-acre farm that also housed a winery.

Pindar, owned by a Dr. Dan Damianos, is a family-owned and operated farm, the most successful, according to Chien, on the island. They grow 16 different varieties of grapes.

To entice potential grape growers in southeast Pennsylvania, Chien noted that there is potential.

"The reason I'm here is because the Pennsylvania wine industry really wants to grow top-quality grapes," he said.

The varieties that can be grown are the French hybrids and Vinifera varieties that are suitable to environmental and soil conditions on the East Coast.

"The trouble with vineyards," said Chien, "is that they don't easily translate to what's usually perceived as good agricultural farmland. The best vineyards tend to be up in the hills, basically on ground that nobody else will farm. The soils that grapes grow in are generally considered inhospitable to most other crops, certainly field crops and most row crops."

What growers should look for are locations that are on a hillside, with south facing positions, shallow soil, in a pocket to protect the vines from severe winter temperatures. The soil should be porous, well drained, and could even be rocky with low clay content. Sandy soils can work well for grape production.

Most growers don't know exactly what kind of varieties on what types of rootstocks will do, and what kinds of wines can be made, until the vines mature — which usually take about 10 years.

And growers need to rethink the mentality that high production is essential, because it's not.

"Grapes are very unique in that you have to find a balance between production and the quality of the fruit," said Chien. "There is a kind of inverse relationship. The lower your production, the higher quality the fruit will be. You are not trying to maximize production — it's a different mentality from what a lot of farmers have."

Said Chien, "I wouldn't say you could just take a tobacco field and put wine grapes in, even though it's considered a high-value cash crop, and expect to grow really high-quality grapes. It's a little bit more complicated than that, as far as site selection, which is somewhat of a problem."

But Chien welcomes farmers to consider growing grapes.

"I would wish that other farmers would take an interest in planting grapes," he said, "because Pennsylvania needs more grape acreage. There are hundreds of excellent sites out there to grow grapes and make high-quality wine. It's out there just about everywhere if you have climate boundaries that you can operate within. The sites are out there — you just have to find them."

"The potential is huge for this young industry."

In fact, it took Oregon 25 years to get an extension agent for the number of acres they had. Pennsyl-

vania has one with even less acreage, but with more opportunity.

Here, said Chien, "you have these huge metropolitan areas with fairly sophisticated people who like wine and who have quite a bit of disposable income. And if they can be persuaded that Pennsylvania wine is of relative high quality and is worth visiting the wineries and things like that, then the sky's the limit."

The challenge is coming up with climate and pest control strategies to help grape crops — normally suited for cooler, less humid conditions — adopt to the hot, humid, and winter variable conditions in the state.

When Chien began producing grapes in Oregon, the goal was to harvest about 4-5 tons per acre. But good quality red wine requires grapes at 2 to 2½ tons per acre. The wineries can afford to pay \$2,000 per ton for grapes — because they charge consumers \$25-\$35 for a bottle of wine.

Wineries in the county, particularly Nissley Vineyards, Bainbridge, reflect the European

beliefs. The average European winemaker is "appalled" at the American system of grape growers separate from winemakers. For most growers in Europe, the grape grower is the winemaker.

For some, the dry, sunny conditions have produced a good crop this year — though drought conditions can be deadly to every crop, including grapes. And hurricanes can also devastate crops.

Grape vines prefer weather conditions to be 77 degrees Fahrenheit with low humidity. If too hot, growing shuts down. The heat, if stressful for people, is bad for plants too, noted Chien.

But those interested in growing grapes, in Chien's experience, come from diverse backgrounds. Frequently they have an "overtly romanticized notion of what growing grapes and making wine are all about."

It's important to get the facts straight before starting a grape-growing enterprise. Growers who are interested in finding out more can contact Chien at the Lancaster extension office, (717) 394-6851.

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