

Iowa Grape and Wine Industry to Benefit from \$2.5 Million USDA Grant

The Midwest Grape and Wine Industry Institute (MGWII) at Iowa State University is one of the major players on a \$2.5 million grant that will help a team of researchers from Nebraska to New York tackle challenges in vineyard, winery, tasting room, and tourism to bring cold hardy grapes to a wider market.

The focus of the grant is a group of extremely cold-hardy wine grape varieties, new to both growers and consumers, which have spawned new small-winery industries in the upper Midwest and Northeast over the past decade. In Iowa alone the industry has grown from 100 acres of grape vines and 14 wineries in the year 2000, to over 1,200 acres and 94 wineries today in 2011.

The challenges ahead include determining the best growing conditions, how to modify the higher grape acidity and showcase their aroma, and how to build tourism networks to draw visitors to tasting rooms, where a majority of sales take place.

“These varieties are unique. Practices that producers use to grow and make Riesling and Merlot won't work for these varieties, due to differences in their genetic background and fruit chemistry,” said Tim Martinson, project director and senior extension associate at Cornell. “Producers of newer varieties—like Marquette, Frontenac and Brianna — face additional challenges in establishing markets to promote and sell these wines.

Iowa State University will be receiving \$551,766 in grant funding for this project over the next two years. The interdisciplinary team at ISU includes; Lead-PI, Murli Dharmadhikari (Director, Midwest Grape and Wine Industry Institute), and Co-PI's Paul Domoto and Gail Nonnecke (Horticulture), and Jacek Koziel (ABE).

Dr. Domoto will lead the Viticulture Studies group, and have co-responsibility with Dr. Nonnecke for research vineyard trials in Iowa. Dr. Koziel will work as part of the Fruit Composition and Genetics group on sensory profiling and volatile metabolites. Dr. Dharmadhikari will oversee fruit chemistry, winemaking trials, and serve as a Liaison to Project Advisory Council team. In addition, Dr. Dharmadhikari along with Field Specialist, Mike White, will serve on Extension and Consumer/Marketing teams. Dr. Paul Lasley (Sociology-AGLS) will lead and coordinate project evaluation.

Their goal is to provide producers with research-based tools and practices to help them grow, vinify, and sell quality wines to local and regional markets.

“The grant application was successful in no small part because the wine institute at ISU has both state funding and industry support to meet the matching funds requirement,” noted MGWII Director and Lead ISU Investigator, Dr. Murli Dharmadhikari. “We greatly appreciate the assistance of and collaboration with our Iowa wine industry partners. The success of this project relies on it”.

Iowa industry collaborators include: Dr. Paul Tabor, Tabor Home Vineyards and Winery; Dr. Paul Tabor, Tabor Home Vineyards and Winery; Stanley Olson, Owner, Penoach Winery and Nursery; Tom Moore, Viticulture Technician, Kirkwood Community College; Charles Caldwell, Owner, Black Squirrel Vineyard and Winery; Dave Cushman, General manager, Park Farm Winery; John and Diane Larson, Owners, Snus Hill Winery; Steve Richardson, Vineyard manager, Tassel Ridge Winery; and Bob Werson, Tassel Ridge Winery.

The consortium includes researchers from the primary institution Cornell University, and collaborating institutions Iowa State University, Michigan State University, Oklahoma State University, North Dakota State

University, South Dakota State University, the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station and the Universities of Illinois, Massachusetts (Amherst), Minnesota, Nebraska, Vermont, and Wisconsin.

Ultimately, they hope the project will help convert startup wineries into sustainably profitable enterprises that can fuel rural economic development.

The grant was funded by the by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI), which supports multi-institution, interdisciplinary research on crops including fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, and ornamentals.