

Niagara Wine Trail celebrates 20 years this summer

Niagara Wine Trail recently underwent a rebranding in honor of its 20th anniversary

√ What started out as 2 has grown to 14, and new executive director, Susan Swiatkowski, leading organization

BY MICHELLE BLACKLEY GLYNN

The grape has deep roots in Niagara County – and thanks to the Niagara Wine Trail, its growing climate and season, the fruit has become an important part of the local tourism industry.

The Niagara grape was created locally in 1868 when Concord grapes were cross-bred with Cassidy grapes, according to historical references. It was first sold commercially in 1882. In 1952, the National Grape Cooperative allowed farmers to grow grapes and sell them to Welch's. It wasn't until 2002 that Niagara Landing and Warm Lake were started and the Niagara Wine Trail was born.

The timing couldn't have been more perfect, as wine tourism started to become the hype across the U.S., and it grew from there.

According to Margo Bittner, chairperson of the Niagara Wine Trail's marketing committee and owner of The Winery at Marjim Manor in Appleton, most of the wineries started as an outgrowth of a family farm, which can be a challenge for a "mom and pop" operation, but the Niagara Frontier's beautiful countryside offers a helpful microclimate that yields to growing Vinifera and native grapes, a late harvest and Ice Wines. Meads and ciders can also be found locally.

Like all tourism businesses the past two years, the Niagara Wine Trail struggled during the pandemic. Now, all members are in operation and have lifted any regulations.

With these changes also came the opening of the executive di-

rector position. When it became vacant, according to representatives of the wine trail, Susan Swiatkowski was the perfect fit for the job. With a background in local tourism, she not only brings enthusiasm to the role, but also the expertise needed to promote it.

"I have three favorite things in Western New York," Swiatkowski said. "Niagara Falls, the Buffalo Bills and the Niagara Wine Trail. This is really a dream job for me. It allows me to blend both my career experience and one of my favorite pastimes in one role."

Her Niagara Wine Trail colleagues agree.

"Sue was the perfect candidate for the position. Not only is she passionate about Niagara, she also visits the wineries frequently and loves the wine," said Shane Gustafson, president of the Niagara Wine Trail, and owner of Gust of Sun Winery in Ransomville. "She's a wonderful ambassador of the area, and her background shows. We are excited about the fresh perspective she brings and the new ideas she's already started to implement, all of which wouldn't be possible without Sue's leadership and dedication. It's not easy getting 14 independent businesses all on the same page, but she has shown she can."

Bryan DeGraw, owner of Mead 810 in Medina, agreed.

"I'm excited to have Sue as the executive director of the Niagara Wine Trail," he said. "She brings marketing knowledge and experience in our region that will help the wine trail grow. She is a motivated individual and brings positive energy that will benefit the trail's marketing and events."

Swiatkowski said her background in tourism will help with the role as she is able to connect



Susan Swiatkowski, executive director of the Niagara Wine Trail, kicks off a celebratory summer at Leonard Oakes Estate Winery in Medina.

the wineries to available resources and promotions, and collaborative efforts throughout the year.

"Getting more guests to visit the wine trail also allows visitors to stay longer, spend more money and support economic development throughout Niagara County," she said. "Working with the Niagara Wine Trail allows me the opportunity to promote small businesses. I am also able to visit the wineries and help create special fundraising events, which have always been one of the best parts of any position I've held."

This summer will begin a year-long celebration for the Ni-

agara Wine Trail, featuring new and returning events, refreshed branding, a new Niagara Falls icon-inspired logo, as well as a new tag line reminding visitors of the very "intimate, authentic and charming" experience they will find along the 60-mile trail – from Lake Ontario, through Niagara, Orleans and Monroe counties.

Many wineries, especially those with small staff or tasting rooms, have adopted a more personal approach to wine tastings. Guests are urged to call each winery ahead of the date they plan to visit before finalizing any group transport. According to Gustafson, it

has become industry standard to make reservations when visiting a tasting room, especially if traveling with more than four people.

Some calendar highlights include the return of the Niagara Wine Festival, July 23-24, at Academy Park in Lewiston; a new pre-season kickoff football-themed weekend experience, Aug. 20-21, and a 20th anniversary wine pairing dinner, at The View in Sanborn – both possible through Swiatkowski's leadership.

For more information about these events, and a series of holiday-inspired shopping activities, visit www.NiagaraWineTrail.org.

Josh Groban (cont.)

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Josh Groban: I think it's definitely given me a 32,000-foot view to kind of widen my scope a little bit about the things that normally would stress me out. I think that, going out there – especially these last two and I'm sure all summer – I was always grateful to be able to do what I do.

I kind of started doing this when I was a teenager, and so there hasn't really been a lot of time to back up and look at it all from that space, and that time away, since I started. And so, there's definitely a stronger sense of gratitude and of excitement to just smell the roses while they're in front of me, rather than kind of going back and looking at pictures of roses and trying to smell them.

I think there's a lot of that and, regardless of COVID, I'm at a point in my career where I feel very lucky that I can go left or right and make decisions that are exciting for me, because I want to do them, and because I feel like I've worked hard enough to have a fan base that allows me to move left and right as I want to.

And so, it just gave me that extra kick to kind of say, "Well, you know, blink and you miss it. Blink and you miss time here." And "You might as well do things that just excite you. Don't worry about the stuff that's not worth doing."

Q: This summer, you're going to be playing at some of the top venues around the country. Tell me a little bit about your live show, and what people can expect – particularly for those who may be coming out to see you for the first time.

Josh Groban: Every type of show I do has like a little bit of a different energy. And when we do a summer tour, one of the things I really like about the summer tours, there's just a little bit more of a casual nature to it. When I'm doing an arena show or a theater show, there's a kind of a feeling of formality to the production – like we're inviting people into a house. There's a certain element of putting on a show with a capital "S," you know, in an enclosed environment.

And when you have, like you said, some of these top venues – these gorgeous outdoor venues – where the venue itself is already providing so much of the experience. When I go see a show at the Greek Theatre or Darien Lake, or if I go to Tanglewood, or if I go to Red Rocks, I'm always going for the artists that I want to see. And also, it doesn't hurt that I'm going to a venue that I just love sitting in that venue. People don't say that about going to a sports arena.

So, there's an element to the summer shows where we want to let the venue, and the experience of being out with us like that, do some of the talking. There's a little bit more, like, banter; and there's a little bit more kind of, like, "Well, maybe we should play this next?" Or, you know, I'm not going to be in a suit. There's certain elements, from the setlist to the style of the show – it's still going to be super high-quality, of course – we've got the best of the best of the best people out there – but it just has a looseness to it that I really like, for the summer shows.

Q: On any given night, there's 100

different songs that you could play that the audience will be thrilled to hear. How do you make those determinations on a night-by-night basis?

Josh Groban: That's a tough one because, yeah, my first tour, we had to find songs to put in the setlist, because I literally didn't have enough. Now, you know, with 10 albums and hundreds of songs, it's hard to know. And also, because I've always been like an album artist, not like a singles artists. So, you know, even though I have like a couple of songs that I can't get off stage without singing, the other 15, 16 songs, generally, like every fan has a different favorite from an album.

And so, it's very, very hard sometimes to choose stuff that feels right; and generally, we just kind of try to do it based on the energy of the kind of show we're doing at that time. And also, usually, like if I've released an album – like with "Harmony" – there's a style to that album that kind of dictates what the other songs should be around, and so there's no square pegs in a round hole.

We try to always mix it up with new songs, old favorites, stuff people aren't expecting, collaborations people aren't expecting. That's kind of our formula we like to stick to, and give people stuff that they really want.

Josh Groban brings his "Harmony Summer 2022 Tour" to the Darien Lake Amphitheater at 7 p.m. Friday, July 1. Special guests joining him for this show include the legendary New Orleans Preservation Hall Jazz Band, as well as violinist/singer Lucia Micarelli, and singer-songwriter Eleri Ward.

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