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Vineyard, orchard rising from old County potato farm (<http://bangordailynews.com/2016/08/08/news/aroostook/vineyard-orchard-rising-from-old-county-potato-farm/>)

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On a 60-acre family farm in Fort Fairfield that was left fallow for four decades, Jeff and Judy Armstrong are tending to a growing fruit farm, experimenting with wine making and also using some unique pest control practices.

Over 30 acres on their Currier Road property passed on by Jeff's father, the Armstrongs have 6,000 grape vines and 1,600 fruit trees, mostly apples, comprising a vineyard and orchard just getting started.

"The average age of the trees is four years. This year, for the first real time, our apples are starting to produce fruit," said Jeff Armstrong. The couple also started making wine from grape varieties like Frontenac and Valiant, and are thinking about selling it within the next few years, which would make this Aroostook County's second commercial winery and the only one to use grapes.

Richard and Jean Sloat, who run a craft and embroidery shop in Houlton, started Hidden Spring Winery (<https://www.google.com/url?q=http://www.hiddenspringwinery.com/&sa=D&ust=1470433704044000&usg=AFQjCNHrzANG5GQU4yYAi6qmZg7JKXdtmA>) in Hodgdon last fall, making fruit wines from local wild and cultivated fruits like choke cherry, elderberry, rhubarb, apple and strawberry, as well as grape wines from imported juice.

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They are not yet distributing their wines, but sell bottles and servings from a tasting room at their farmstead.

The wines the Armstrongs are working on are similar to many originating from California's Napa Valley, although with some "unique characteristics" thanks to the colder climate. "We get frost in September and October, and warm afternoons, and it sweetens up the grapes."

The Armstrongs started planting the vineyard and orchard in 2009, almost 20 years after they moved back to their native Fort Fairfield from Portland and settled at the property of Jeff's family farm. Jeff left the town in the late 1970s for college and to pursue a career in engineering, around the same time his father gave up potato farming and became a plumber. The farm, like other fallow land in the area, grew into a young forest.

"It took about 10 years to get that cleared, and then I thought maybe we should do something with the land. We had to do something other than mow the grass."

Jeff's brother suggested apples, as other apple orchards in Caribou and Presque Isle were growing at the time, and he got the idea for the grapes from the Bible. "One day I was reading the parable of the vine and the branches, and I was inspired by that: What about grapes?"

They started researching and talked with a now deceased woman in Washburn who tended a small vineyard with her husband, and then visited Lincoln Peak Vineyard in New Haven, Vermont, where the owners "were 12 years ahead and doing well."

So far, so good with their vineyard and orchards, too, Armstrong said, adding that he hopes local farmers and gardeners will give grapes in particular a try. The Armstrongs sell many of the same cold-hardy varieties of vines and trees they're growing, such as the seedless variety Somerset, along with honey, fresh vegetables and other goods, from a shop (https://www.google.com/url?q=http://www.armstrongff.com/our-produce-products/&sa=D&ust=1470433704048000&usg=AFQjCNH7i_QkZbE3M6dmca52DGxdphRzVw) inside Jeff's business, Armstrong Engineering (<https://www.google.com/url?q=http://www.armstrongeng.com/&sa=D&ust=1470433704048000&usg=AFQjCNEcHooDR7k8AsP9X5KMnnou3WI9cA>), in Fort Fairfield.

While the Armstrongs surprised family and neighbors by planting 15 acres of grapes in potato country, they've also taken a highly unconventional approach to common fungal diseases of the grapes and fruits, with a treatment known as ionized water.

"Basically, the machine puts a positive electrical charge in the water, and that electrical charge causes the spore to be destroyed" by creating an acidic environment for the fungus, Armstrong said.

Like potato growers, conventional vineyards and orchards normally rely on a number of synthetic fungicides to control blights, mildews and other diseases, and ionized water is virtually unheard of in the United States. Armstrong said he discovered that farmers in other countries are using ionized water as fungal treatment in greenhouses, and he found a Canadian business that is testing ionizer machines that could be developed for the agricultural market.

"It seems almost too good to be true," said Judy Armstrong. Yet they say the treatment has allowed them to control downy mildew, one of the worst grape diseases, with a spray that's harmless to humans.

They also use ionized water on the potatoes they sell, although they normally avoid major potato pests because they harvest most of the spuds early as new potatoes.

"Ionized water would be great for late blight," Jeff Armstrong said. "I roughly determined that [potato growers] would save 50 percent on chemicals in a year." He added that he thinks it could also help control the Colorado Potato Beetle.

Although their farm is not certified organic, the Armstrongs said they largely follow organic practices and avoid synthetic and toxic pesticides. To control insects, for instance, they spray a water and baking soda mixture.

As their production starts growing, the Armstrongs are still figuring out what they will do with the fruits, between wines, ciders, jams, pick-your-own and fresh fruit, but they're looking forward to passing the farm on to their kids and grandkids, as Jeff Armstrong's family did for four generations.

The farm already has about 50 old apple trees, some dating back more than a century, including the Yellow Dutchess planted by Armstrong's great-grandfather.

"An apple tree will last a long time and so will a grape vine," he said.

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