

BUSINESS

Altamont Winery elevates production with new equipment

A new grape press and pump increases quality and timeliness of wine processing

By **Kelsey Brown**, Staff Writer
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Mike DeCrescenzo, co-owner of Altamont Vineyard & Winery, shows the new grape press and pump at the winery on Thursday, Aug.15, 2024 in Altamont, N.Y. Lori Van Buren/Times Union

GUILDERLAND — For the Altamont Vineyard and Winery, reopening post-pandemic spurred interest in the business' scenic outdoor space.

Twenty-five variants of grapes span the vineyard's cultivated 15 acres, with wildflowers scattered in between rows. A gazebo by a pond, adorned with a fountain, is a frequent spot for wedding ceremonies. An arch tucked in between rows of grapes is a prime location for proposals. Though the family business originally ignited from a passion for wine from Michael DiCrescenzo's father, Louis, it has evolved into a multifaceted operation often booked with events, parties and weddings.

Michael DiCrescenzo, owner of Altamont Vineyard and Winery, estimates the desire for outdoor gatherings nearly tripled its sales.

"We made limoncello out of lemons," DiCrescenzo laughed.

That growth has prompted the DiCrescenzos to find a more effective way to produce its wine. Since opening in 2009, the business relied on a 35-year-old press for production. The old unit had a rubber bladder that squeezed air and left grapes caked to all sides of the press, yielding 5% to 10% less juice. Workers would have to scrape the grapes from the sides of the machine, with similar force and motion of picking ice from a surface, and use pails to scoop and dump in the product.

The recent purchase of a new must pump and pneumatic press will reduce this back-breaking labor, high production cost and slower production time, doubling productivity, DiCrescenzo said. With the old equipment, completing two press loads a day would push the limit. Now, the winery should be able to complete three to five press loads, producing 1½ tons per load. The new press is able to hold up to 8,800 pounds of fresh lees and more than 12,000 pounds of fermented lees, which are deposits of residual yeast. Additionally, there will be less oxygen that interacts with the wine during its processing, boosting its quality.

"The new press is going to give us a better product in the end," DiCrescenzo said. "There's less oxidation. (It's) easier to clean. The materials that this new press is made out of are more sanitary."

DiCrescenzo said he tried for years to get a grant through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, but was "shot down half a dozen times trying."

The business hadn't received a loan since it opened, until applying for Pioneer's [Express Small Business Lending program](#), which allocated less than \$40,000 to purchase the new grape press and pump. To receive the loan, Altamont Vineyard and Winery had to come up with 10% of the money upfront, paying 7.5% interest. DiCrescenzo said the loan was better than expected, as Pioneer offered to finance 90% of the loan while the grants he had previously applied for were 50/50 matches.

The Express Small Business Lending program rolled out earlier this year, according to Collin Gibson, Pioneer business banking associate. In the previous year, the company received feedback from business owners stating the process to receive loans — which required extensive paperwork with a three-year look back — was a cumbersome and time-consuming process.

"It's overwhelming, especially if you're a small business where you don't have a whole team behind you," DiCrescenzo said.

Pioneer responded by creating a program that informs applicants within 48 hours if their loan is approved. All that is required to apply is one year of business and personal tax returns and a personal financial statement. Gibson said this is important because "everything is quick" for small businesses.

"They're in the grind of it, day in and day out," Gibson said. "It's helpful to have less paperwork and a quicker turnaround time, so they can get the funding and do what they need to do a little faster."

Though DiCrescenzo has not been able to use the new press and pump because the grapes aren't ready for harvest until around the first week of September, he is confident that with the loan and new equipment obtained, the efficiency and quality of the business will be elevated.

"This is really like visions and dreams all starting to come together," he said. "This is just the next stepping stone to where we're building."

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