

Airfield Estate Winery launches harvest operations

■ PATRICK SHELBY
Managing Editor

SUNNYSIDE — Airfield Estate Winery’s harvest has been soaring to flavorful heights this season while vineyard and winemaking crews were strategically mobilized to deliver an on-time October payload of more than 420 tons of fruit during the week leading up to the lower valley’s first frost. Balancing ultimate ripening times with fall harvesting operations propels Marcus Miller, owner and president of his family’s fourth generation winery, along with winemaker Travis Maple, to launch synchronized plans for bringing in 830 acres with over 20 varietals of grapes by Halloween. “We always try to give the grapes as much hang time as possible. You feel like

you’ve done your job when you can let them hang and hang and have days on the vine,” Miller warmly reflected while walking through the premium parcel of reserve Cab Franc on Friday, Oct. 2. “Travis can’t, in the cellar, produce ripeness. It takes the sun and hang time to achieve that perfect ripeness level. So, I need to make sure that especially the most important blocks are hitting that on the money,” the vintner favorably conveyed. Miller proceeded to pick one small dark blue grape which appeared almost black from the easily accessible hanging berry bunch on the seasoned brown stock and sampled the concentrated fruit. A healthy smile replaced his protective face covering. The flavorful taste called to mind words of wisdom that trusted winemakers

had imparted on him from the time he was an adventurous viticulture student and working a harvest in New Zealand to creating his family’s signature blends while elevating the complexity of their wines. “You’re never going to kick yourself for letting something hang out here an extra week, but you will kick yourself for harvesting something early and not having that ripeness level you were seeking,” Miller candidly spoke. The 80 degree temperatures in late September and early October have been an unexpected surprise as indicated over the past five years of weather patterns, according to Miller. “It’s always trying to balance the best winemaking you can possibly do with the need to process a specific amount of tons in a certain time frame.”

During the same seven day stretch last year, the high was only 43 degrees and the lower valley would experience their first freeze, prohibiting additional ripening and further development of flavorful profiles. Ripening at this time of the year is unheard of, which has contributed to the uplifting excitement about this year’s “rock star” vintage, Miller enthusiastically stated. “When we can get this fruit really ripe, game on. It’s going to be killer!” The family shares a distinguished bond within the natural surroundings of the area where a portion of the land was a training base for hundreds of Army Air Corps pilots during World War II.



Patrick Shelby/Sunnyside Sun

Hand picking grapes required steady and skilled hands to capture all the low hanging fruit.



Patrick Shelby/Sunnyside Sun

Workers pick fresh picked grapes into plastic-lined bins during the fall harvest.

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