



#FridaysOnTheFarm: From Vine to Wine

From the kitchen table to the boardroom table, USDA brings people together across the nation for: healthier food, natural resources, and people; a stronger agricultural industry; and economic growth, jobs, and innovation.

Each Friday, meet those farmers, producers, and landowners through our [#FridaysOnTheFarm](#) stories. Visit local farms, ranches, forests, and resource areas where USDA customers and partners *do right and feed everyone*.

This Friday, meet Andy and India Farmer, who cultivate cold climate grapes in Pawlet, Vermont. The Farmers are early adopters in this niche industry.

Pioneers in the Field

You could say Andy Farmer was born to make a living from the land. Ironically, he says inexperience gave him the edge he needed. "Having a little ignorance served me well because I didn't know how big of a thing I was getting into," he says.

Seventeen years ago, the 23-year-old was a beginning farmer. Today, he and his wife have established themselves in a niche market that specifically serves cold climate grape growers in the northern United States.

In an industry where winemakers are celebrated, their names etched upon the bottles of wine, it's the farmers who nurture and grow the contents in that bottle who are the real heroes.

The industry of cold climate grape vines didn't exist two decades ago when the Farmers got started. Recent development of cold-hardy hybrid grape varieties has given new life to a blossoming market. Andy spends a good bit of time on the road at conferences, sharing his experience with other growers. People are getting excited about what he's doing, and they're now selling to as far away as Maine and Montsna.

Planting the Seeds

In 2002, Andy and India created [Northeastern Vine Supply, Inc.](#) The business grew quickly, and they realized they needed their own land to really make their business succeed. "When we purchased this farm in 2009, we knew we needed a combination of well-drained soils and an abundant irrigation supply," Andy says.



They farm in the valley along the Mettowee River, which has naturally fertile soils. Their farm is suited for their unique grapevine production because of its deep sandy loam soil, a favorable northern climate, and of course, the nearby river.

In 2010, the Farmers purchased their land with the help of the [Vermont Land Trust](#), enrolling the land in a conservation easement to limit development and subdivision of the property while keeping it a working farm. Andy says that without this assistance they would not have been able to afford the land.

“I was very interested in farming, but I knew I also had to make a living, and that isn’t always easy,” he admits.

Soil: The Foundation of the Vine

The Farmer’s started with 1,500 grapevines. Today, they grow a quarter million vines. Their farm consists of 188 acres, 35 which are cropped.

“We try to use the best viticultural practices possible while managing our nursery and vineyard.”

Viticulture is the science of growing grapevines. New viticulture technology in the form of cold-hardy and disease-resistant hybrid grape varieties has made it possible to grow in cool and cold areas that were previously thought to be impossible. And, the Farmers know it’s important to have a solid foundation upon which to cultivate their vines.

From the beginning, they worked closely with their local USDA’s [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) to make conservation improvements on their farm, which benefited both the farm and natural resources. Much of their work focused on using water wisely, preventing soil erosion, and building soil health.

With the help of NRCS, they installed a pipeline to get water from the river to a new drip irrigation system, replacing a less efficient irrigation system. The new irrigation system helps conserve water and can improve vine health by directing water straight to the plant.

Meanwhile, crop rotation and multi-species cover crops protect against soil erosion, regulate vine growth, and improve soil fertility and water holding capacity.

Farm to Table

Additionally, the Farmers also grow table grapes for the local market. These are thriving in a controlled environment inside of a [high tunnel](#), which they built with the help of NRCS, too.



These plastic-covered structures protect plants from severe weather and allow farmers to extend their growing seasons. “Ultimately, the high tunnels are providing us with an opportunity to try growing table grapes organically,” says Andy.

These structures are working so well, they are in the process of constructing an additional two this year with NRCS assistance. There are also lots of risk involved including finding labor, preventing pest damage, weather extremes, increasing energy costs, market variability, and natural disasters. These factors make the controlled environment of the high tunnel even more valuable for the table grape business.

Improving Water Quality

The Farmers worked with USDA’s Farm Service Agency to create a riparian forest buffer with assistance through the [Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program](#). Just after planting the trees in 2011, Hurricane Irene devastated Vermont. Now, the buffer has recovered and is helping to protect water quality by reducing sediment runoff into the Mettowee River.

“I know that conservation is the right thing to do,” says Andy. “I hope we can keep doing this and take care of the land. It grows on you. You make everything from dirt, and you get attached to it.”

The Farm Family

Despite Andy’s Farmer namesake, he’s the first in his family to pursue the profession full-time. He admits it has been a bit of a roller coaster ride.

“In 2007 when the housing market collapsed, our phone stopped ringing,” he recalls. “But, 2010 was one of our best years.”

Andy and India have two children – a seven-year old son and three-year old daughter. He says that his son is already taking an active interest in the grapes, and soon enough, as he grows taller, will be able to pick them. But for now, he’s delighted to deliver the grapes in his wagon to local neighbors who buy them.

Behind the Vine

Andy is honest when he speaks about the realities of his profession as a supplier of cold hardy vines. “The nursery industry is not really sought after. Nobody in their right mind would do this.



I don't work with grapes. I don't work with wine. We work with sticks, we are covered with dirt, we are bent over, and we are in a facet of this industry that no wine drinker every considers," he says.

Yet, the Farmers love what they do, and are committed to conservation for the protection and improvement of the resources on and around his farm. Farmers like Andy and India, who plant, nurture, protect, and grow the vine, are shaping the future of this important agricultural industry. So, next time you raise a glass, don't forget to thank the farmers behind the vine.

More Information

USDA offers a variety of risk management, disaster, loan, and conservation programs to help agricultural producers in the United States weather ups and downs in the market and natural disasters as well as invest in improvements to their operations. [Learn about additional programs.](#)

For more information about USDA services, contact your [local USDA service center](#).

Story Credits: Amy Overstreet, NRCS

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