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GRAND OPENING: Freedom Run opens doors Saturday

Lockport Union-Sun & Journal

BY THOMAS HALLECK

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CAMBRIA — Freedom Run Winery started three years ago, when Sean Manning, along with brothers Larry and Chip, went to look at a farm that had come up for sale near the family's homestead.

Sean asked Larry what they should do with the property.

"There were a bunch of grapes on it, and just joking around, I said to them, 'Let's start a winery,'" Larry said. "A month later, we were digging a hole in the ground."

The winery is named "Freedom Run" because the property is located on the Niagara Escarpment, often the path that escaping slaves took to Canada.

"They used the escarpment as a road map, to the narrowest point in the (Niagara) River, where they would swim across the border," Sean said.

The winery, located on 5138 Lower Mountain Road in the Town of Cambria, will hold its grand opening Saturday. A \$15 fee will cover food as well as wine, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Chef Warren J. Drew, executive at the Lancaster Country Club, will prepare the food.

"He's going to do asado, an Argentinean-style barbecue," Larry said.

The chef will prepare ship house rounds, or 60-pound rounds of hindquarter beef.

"We're also doing lamb, duck, vegetable kebobs," Chip said. "It's going to be a little different."

The event will include raffles, door prizes and a grand prize, and all of Freedom Run's wines will be available for tasting.

"I don't have a background in wine, but I learned a lot. We surrounded ourselves with some really great people," Larry said.

Robert Green, who has been making wine in the Lake Erie Region for over 20 years, is Freedom Run's winemaker.

"I'm learning all about the wine trade through him," Larry said.

As chief operating officer, Larry runs the day-to-day operations. As assistant winemaker, he works with Green, designing and taking care of the wines, "right through fermentation, to barreling and bottling."

"Other than that, it's just a family operation," Larry said. "We have all the nieces and nephews helping us to run the operations."

All three brothers are co-owners of Freedom Run.

"We each have our own little nook," said Chip, who is the winery's viticultural estate manager. "I control the farm-side, which is everything from weed control, to maintaining the grapes themselves."

Described as having a "truly green thumb," Chip says that growing conditions are perfect along the Niagara Escarpment.

"Because of the climate, because of the escarpment, because we have a lot of limestone, and the way the lake meets the escarpment, it's just an ideal growing condition," he said. "Plus, you're growing on slopes, which gives you ideal air drainage."

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Sean is the family artist, and has an on-site studio where he makes pottery that can be viewed throughout the tasting room.

He said that, although retired, he works seven days a week, alongside both of his brothers. He said he even has to remind Chip to take a break every once in a while.

"I have to kick his butt to get him off of the property, and tell him to go home," Sean said. "But if I come back two hours or so later, there he'll be."

Sean said that each brother "does his own thing," but it all comes together nicely.

"It's the same thing with Larry, he works seven days a week," he said. "It's because we love doing it. It was the way we were brought up."

Sean explained that after brothers Larry and Chip finished paving the production room floor, he painted a mural that spanned it entirely — 25 by 125 feet.

The "whimsical walkway" was finished in a time crunch, and Sean says it was a true family effort, where work was done night and day, only breaking to eat.

The property also contains two buildings built in 1826.

"One is a stone house we're turning into a champagne house," Sean said. "Chip, along with about a dozen Amish guys, put it down to its original (specifications)."

Larry said that the family found a great deal of help in the community, where people have helped him to learn about growing, grapes and wine.

So, in an effort to "give back to the neighborhood," the brothers are also going to restore the 19th century barn on the property, where they plan to hold old-time barn dances.

All of the work on the estate, the brothers do themselves — from glasswork and pottery to the woodwork in the tasting room.

"We've done a lot of work here to make sure this winery is something special," Sean said. "I made the sinks. We make everything, and here's the thing — out of all the beauty, out of all of the work and all of the family — the wine is outstanding."

Larry said that the 11 wines Freedom Run currently offers range from dry or sweet, to white or red.

His wife, Sandra, came up with the winery's catchphrase, which the brothers say sums the operation up nicely: "We view wine as art."

Sean said that between all the nieces and nephews who help out, Freedom Run has a lively, energetic atmosphere.

"It's a madhouse here," Sean said. "You want to see total, controlled chaos? Come on down."

He said that all of the hard work has paid off — from the property itself to the finished product.

"There's nothing substandard about anything here," Sean said. "If there is, it doesn't belong... Basically, if I don't have to pick your chin up off of the floor, I'll be disappointed."

Thomas Halleck is an intern with the US&J.



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