



Meet the Leader, Connor Evans, General Manager, Castel Grisch Winery

Describe Your Business

A question that many locals and visitors alike ask about our business is how to pronounce our name: it is pronounced “Cas-tell Greesh”, though as long as you’re buying our wine, you can say it however you would like! With over 35 years in business, our winery is one of the original members of the Seneca Lake Wine Trail. 90% of our wines are estate grown, we are proud to say, featuring about 14 different grape varieties these days, with wines ranging in sweetness from bone dry to sweet ice wines. While we take pride in all of our wines we work so hard to craft, we are particularly proud of our ice wines and are confident they are some of the best in the region. We transitioned our restaurant into an event venue a few years ago, available to rent for things like weddings, corporate meetings, banquets, and other

similar gatherings. We no longer are an actual restaurant, though folks oftentimes stop by hoping we are still a tasty German/Austrian restaurant as we were for so many years. The owner, my boss, is Daniel Lai, a very busy entrepreneur who honestly has an amazing amount of passion for our region, doubly so considering he is relatively new to our region. Daniel literally stumbled upon this region, fell in love with it, and his passion for both the Finger Lakes and our wines has definitely been a strong influence on me and our business.

Tell us your story:

I’ve officially been in the wine business for about 12 years. I grew up in the cellar, though, as my father was the winemaker at Castel Grisch for 30 years, so that’s how I got into the business. I started working in the tasting room, like so many do, and slowly worked my way up into wholesale sales for a couple other Finger Lakes wineries. Then I moved into the General Manager position at Castel Grisch Winery in 2014. My dad is now retired, but it was really great to get to work side by side with him for those first few years I was employed here, and I’m proud to be able to continue contributing to this excellent winery where he spent so many years of his professional life. I’m a volunteer firefighter in the community of Hector, and also on the Board of Directors for the Hector Fire Company. I’ve been involved in that organization for about five years and while it can sometimes be difficult for me to be as actively involved as I would prefer at times, especially the busy summer and autumn seasons, it is very rewarding work that I greatly enjoy.

What has helped you succeed and gain experience?

Supervisors’ trust have been very helpful in my success. The people who have been above me over the years, at the various jobs I’ve held, and at the wineries I’ve worked at, have trusted me enough to let me make some mistakes and let me grow from those mistakes. My father’s work ethic has always been very intense, and still is, and I for sure inherited those genes. Working hard comes naturally to me, which is a good thing, because having a stout work ethic is almost a literal necessity in this industry.

What inspires you?

The wine industry, many of the people, that are so passionate about our region and our wines, it really helps me get motivated and inspires me to do better, develop innovative products, and help make Castel Grisch Winery the best it can be. It is the region’s overall passion for wine that ultimately inspires me to do my best work.

What keeps you up at night? What are your challenges?

I was lying in bed just the other night thinking about the tasting room, thinking about keeping my employees happy, that keeps me up for sure. And thinking how to grow the business overall, in this increasingly competitive marketplace, definitely keeps me up at night too, and is a steep, ongoing challenge.

What is your favorite local activity?

Sitting by the lake drinking a nice cold local, craft beer is definitely my favorite activity! And this is coming from the wine guy! Of course, I also enjoy our many great wines from the region, but there is something about just sitting next to the shore, listening to the waves lapping, and sipping a nice chilly beer that is a great way to end a long workday.

Is there anything else we should know about you?

I have an adorable dog named Sampson that brings me a lot of happiness. Sampson is a rescue dog I found at the Schuyler County Humane Society, and he is such a terrific, loving companion. He is oftentimes in the tasting room, so you can always stop by to say hello to him too!

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