

# A STOPOVER AT AIRY ACRES

by Victoria Ritter

Guests to Airy Acres Vineyard will encounter more than a superb selection of wines. With sprawling views of the surrounding hills, live music in the summer months, a space for RV owners to park and a grass runway on the property, Airy Acres offers a unique experience.

Airy Acres is one of the few vineyards in the Finger Lakes Region that grows Saperavi and Rkatsiteli grapes. The boutique winery typically produces lots less than 200 cases,

periodically producing smaller batches of roughly 40 to 60 cases when exploring new ideas.

"This year we had a couple of 'test flight' small batch wines," said Fred Bassette, owner and general manager. "One was the Blanc de Blau, a white Lemberger. The 37 cases sold out in a couple months." Other notable wines include a Saperavi rose – which recently received a wine review score of 90 – a bubbly gewurztraminer and a bubbly rose.

Apart from its 2025 Airport 6NY3 dessert wine, all of Airy

**Left:** Co-owner Pam Bassette stands next to a vineyard of early plantings.

**Right, above:** Betty's Blend Red and White on the deck overlooking vineyard and Cayuga Lake

**Right, below:** The winery tasting room is in a newly renovated 1840s farmhouse.

Acre's wines are made solely from its own grapes. The 2025 vintage will be made from its Lemberger.

We sat down with Bassette to delve into the history of Airy Acres and what makes the winery a popular destination.

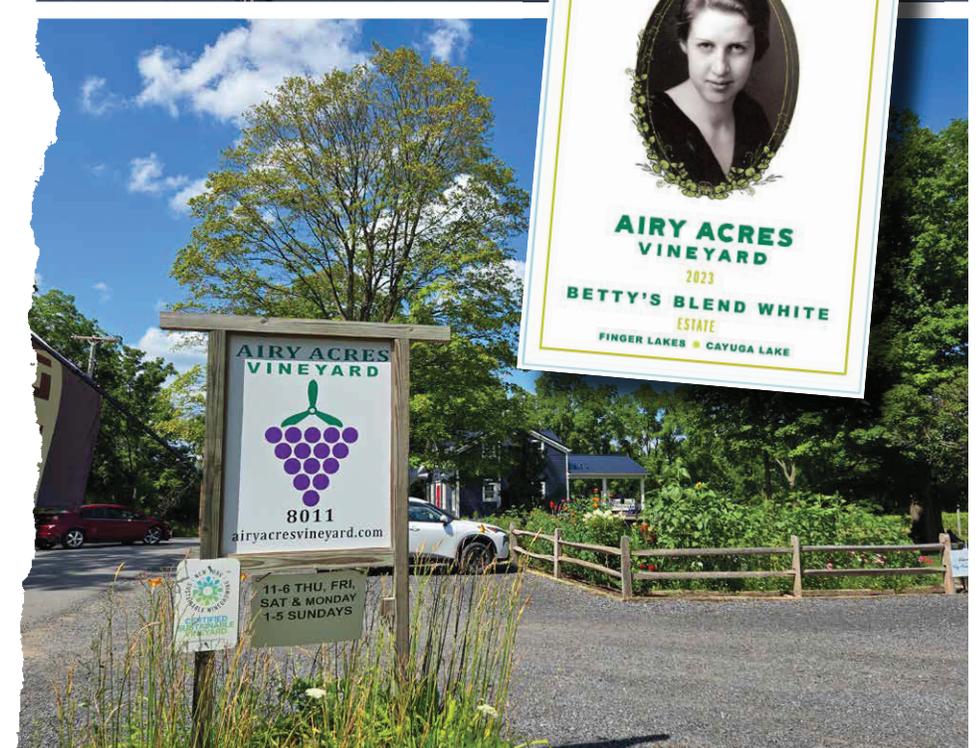
### **Growing through the generations**

Bassette's family has lived in the greater Interlaken area since the 1880s, working as business owners and farmers. In 1918, his maternal side of the family moved from the farm next door to the 21-acre property where Airy Acres stands today. Bassette's mom resided on the property until 2012, living in a restored 1840s farmhouse. "Mom (and I) grew up in the house that's now the tasting room," Bassette said.

When Bassette's parents married in 1950, they gained ownership of the farm. Bassette's dad started a chicken farm around 1952, selling eggs wholesale. He went on to purchase an additional 65 adjacent acres to the north in the hope of growing more crops and caring for more chickens.

Bassette, along with his brother and sister, grew up on the farm. "I worked on the farm from an early age, feeding chickens and helping with preparing fields for planting, planting and harvesting," he recalled. "I learned how to drive tractors when I was old enough to reach the pedals. I fed the chickens and gathered literally thousands of eggs every day by hand; this was before egg production became the nearly fully automated 'factories' of today."

Although Bassette was set to



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*Winery visitors enjoy Saturday summer music on the deck, which runs from 2:30 to 5:30 p.m. Irish music is one of the favorite styles.*



*The Gewurztraminer vineyard overlooks the tasting room and deck.*

Scan QR code to see a history of how the vineyards and winery started.



inherit the property, he went on to pursue a different career. Graduating from Cornell in 1976 with a degree in mechanical engineering, he worked at Kodak in Rochester for 30 years. He then took time to finish a Master of Divinity degree at Northeastern Seminary in Rochester. "Through all those years, we regularly came back to the farm to visit mom and dad," Bassette said. "We also vacationed at the cottage that Grandpa Fred Freestone, my namesake, had built in 1947 on Cayuga Lake."

Prior to his mom's passing in 2014, Bassette and his family explored various options for the farm including selling, moving there in retirement or continue renting the tillable land to a local farmer.

"Knowing our son-in-law, Nate, loved growing plants of all kinds, we had discussions with them about the idea of starting a business growing something on the farm, that they would ultimately move here from New Jersey and take over," Bassette said. "They were interested, and the best idea we came up with was a vineyard selling good vinifera grapes to FLX area wineries."

Bassette spent the next year cleaning up the farm and learning how to grow wine grapes. He and his wife, Pam, tore down two old barns and a few sheds, hauled tons of rusty cars and farm equipment to the metal salvage yard, cut down trees around the buildings and erected a new pole barn. In May 2015, they planted their first three acres of vines. They celebrated their first harvest two years later.

The idea to make their own wine came from Bassette's son, Noah, who had worked at three regional wineries after serving five years in the Navy. "He said 'Let's do wine!' And so, we made 100 cases from the 2020 harvest, and started selling late 2022, early 2023," Bassette said.

### The sky's the limit

Not many vineyards can lay claim to having a private airport on their property. But Airy Acres is one of the few wineries that can.

When Bassette's dad purchased the 65-acre lot in the mid-1950s, it proved to be the ideal place for a private grass runway. He founded Airy Acres Airport in 1957 and eventually came to own four planes: 1957, 1960 and 1963 Cessna 172 Skyhawks and a 1961 Cessna 180 on amphibious floats. Bassette, in turn, earned his private pilot's license at the age of 17.

The vineyard not only got its name from the airport, but aviation plays a large part in its branding. Its logo is a cluster of grapes with a three-blade propeller as the stem. Its port-style dessert wine, Airport 6NY3, is named after the airport, and its blended varietals wines have aviation-themed titles including Crosswind, Glide, Aviator's Red and Osprey.

"Obviously having a runway on the farm is unique," Bassette observed. "I've not discovered another FLX winery with that. However, insurance issues, so far, mean customers don't use it."

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Airy Acres further stands out as a family-owned and -operated business. Pam and all of Bassette's children and their spouses have a hand in running the winery, from being a tasting room manager, vineyard manager, computer consultant to working part-time in the tasting room and helping out with general tasks. Meanwhile, Bassette handles administration work.

"Working with our family as we together build up a business to support at least two families and that hopefully continues for at least another generation is clearly my favorite part of the job," Bassette said.

The Bassettes make a point to honor past generations. Two of Airy Acres' wines are named after Bassette's mom: Betty's Blend white and red. A picture from her 1934 Cornell graduation is featured on the label.

"As one family member is quite celiac sensitive, we take specific effort to be a gluten free facility," Bassette added. "All the packaged snacks and other foods that we sell are gluten free, including the locally source cheeses, nuts and charcuterie."

Bassette acknowledges that it took several people to bring Airy Acres to life. He credits Nate and Noah for inspiring them to grow grapes and make their own wine. Thanks to help from Cornell's Finger Lakes Grapes Program, training from neighbor vineyard owner Bob Ruiz of Sunrise Hill and Phil Davis of Damiani Wine Cellars who was an early buyer of Airy Acres' grapes, the Bassettes were able to start planting a year earlier than they first planned.

"I have also come to believe that going from no prior

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*The first floor tasting room highlights features of the renovated farm house.*

wine or vineyard experience to 21 acres of vinifera vines and 26 gold/silver award-winning wines in 10 years is perhaps a bit unique," Bassette stated.

### **An eye on the horizon**

Airy Acres is flying high, yet Bassette is far from resting on his laurels. Looking ahead, a main goal is to increase sales and exposure. "Being between Routes 96 and 89 puts us a bit off the typical wine trail roads," he commented. "But it's something many customers appreciate for the quiet, secluded vibe."

The Bassettes plan to start constructing a new storage building for pallets of cases of wine in the near future. There's even talk of adding more internal or outside deck seating areas in a few years.

One of the highlights of working at Airy Acres is interacting with customers, answering their questions and receiving feedback, said Bassette. Having such a positive response from the community has been both "humbling and gratifying."

"To see a vision come to life and grow with one's family is just wonderful," Bassette observed.

Bassette appreciates the Finger Lakes Region for its rural farming atmosphere, mesmerizing views and the wonderful people who reside here. He keeps busy outside of the winery, participating in his local church and leading a non-denominational Bible study, attending local chicken barbecues and fish fries and spending time at the family cottage overlooking Cayuga Lake.

"And I want to get back into flying again!" he added. 

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