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USDA Hires a New Grape Breeder at Geneva

by Peter Seem

GENEVA, NY: Chris Owens is central New York's newest molecular biologist and grape breeder. He was hired earlier this year by the Plant Genetics Resources Unit (PGRU), a USDA-ARS facility at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, in Geneva, NY. Owens also holds an appointment with Cornell University as an adjunct assistant professor of horticultural science.

"My long term goal is to improve red wine cultivars for the eastern United States by applying newer technologies, particularly in genomics and molecular biology," said Owens.



Chris Owens
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He hopes to develop cultivars that are disease resistant, with improved tolerance to freezing, yet retain the wine quality of traditional cultivars such as Syrah and Pinot Noir. His program will aid the development of new grape cultivars by developing fundamental knowledge of the grapevine genome structure and function, and by describing the molecular genetics of important traits. Owens hopes the development of new tools and a greater knowledge of grapevine genetics will decrease the amount of time it takes to develop new cultivars and increase the chances of producing high quality red wine cultivars for the Northeast—a task that, historically, has proven to be extremely challenging.

"Chris is a welcomed addition to PGRU," said Larry Roberston, the PGRU's acting research leader. "He brings skills that increase our unit's expertise in molecular characterization and crop improvement."

The PGRU is a component of the USDA-ARS National Plant Germplasm System. The unit in Geneva has national responsibility for certain vegetable crops, as well as apple, cold-hardy grape, and tart cherry. The PGRU is mandated to acquire, maintain, characterize, evaluate, document, and distribute these genetic resources of crops.

Owens has long been interested in fruit breeding and genetics. "I find it to be a very interesting and rewarding area of plant science," he said. While studying for his master's degree in pomology at Cornell, he became interested in grapes as a crop when he took some viticulture and wines courses.

Among his reasons for taking a job at the Experiment Station, Owens cited the available lab and field resources and the Station's history and reputation for excellence in plant breeding. The realities of working at the Station have not disappointed him. "My first few months have been very smooth and productive," he said. "The Station is a very comfortable place to work, and the facilities are outstanding." Owens said he also appreciates being in an environment where there is potential for collaboration and interaction with a variety of scientists from the Experiment Station, as well as the academic freedom to pursue his own research.

Born and raised in the Washington D.C. area, Owens earned his B.S. in horticulture from the University of Maryland in 1995, his M.S. in pomology from Cornell University in 1997, and his Ph.D. in plant breeding and genetics from Michigan State University in 2001.

Owens lives in Ithaca, NY.

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