Maryland Resource Based Industry Financing Fund “MRBIFF” Recipient: Black Ankle Vineyards

MARBIDCO’s First Loan: A Look Back & Into the Future of Black Ankle Vineyards

In celebration of MARBIDCO’s 15th anniversary, we look back at our first loan recipient in 2007, their history, and where they are today.

Black Ankle Vineyards was conceived by two young profession-als who walked away from lucrative consulting careers to follow their dream – to create a world-class vine-yard and winery in Maryland.

Sarah O’Herron and Ed Boyce were serious about their new venture, and it took several years to bring their vision to fruition. Having no winemaking experience, they traveled to renowned wine regions from Chile to France to New Zealand learning the art of winemaking.

With their newfound knowl-edge, they searched for the perfect Maryland soil and old-world har-vestable grapes to grow and then researched how to build a sustain-able eco-friendly complex utilizing nature’s yield from the piece of earth they hoped to purchase.

That ideal 146-acre property was discovered in 2002 in the rolling, rocky terrain of Maryland’s Piedmont area in Mount Airy, Frederick County: perfect for grape growing with good drainage and a temperate climate on a hilly landscape.

“Not the kind of soil most farmers are looking for,” joked O’Herron. Working the land and planting their initial 22 acres with a dozen or so grape varietals in 2003-2004 took time, but by 2006 the couple had their first harvest. Boyce and O’Herron now needed wine-making equipment and a tasting-sales facility to share their blended Bordeaux-and Burgun-dy-style wines with the public.

Enter MARBIDCO

O'Herron and Boyce met with a loan officer at the local Mid-Atlantic Farm Credit who introduced them to the State's newly formed qua-si-public financial institution offer-ing low-interest loans to agri-busi-nesses, called the Maryland Agricultural and Resource-Based Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO).

MARBIDCO had just opened its Maryland Resource Based Industry Financing Fund or "MRBIFF" program and the couple obtained the corporation's very first loan. MARBIDCO's loan funds, in addition to Mid-Atlantic Farm Credit, allowed the couple to build a sustainable straw-built facility made from straw, wood, stone, and clay retrieved on their land.

The distinctive energy-effi-cient building with solar panels and a green (vegetation) roof opened in 2008.

"In this industry, it is such a huge outlay of begin-ning capital and being able to get a low-cost loan with a super low-interest rate and great terms was wonderful," said O'Herron. "MARBIDCO was a big help to get us going to construct our tasting room."

MRBIFF has since become the most popular loan in MARBID-CO's portfolio of financial pro-grams.

With the help of a commer-cial lender, qualified applicants can receive loan amounts, up to $300,000 for the acquisition of equipment and fixed assets, up to $600,000 for real estate purchases, and $900,000 for large-scale food/fiber processing projects.

Black Ankle Vineyards has also received three small grants from MARBIDCO over the years.

Growing a Vineyard

The rocky low-fertility soil in the Piedmont region where Black Ankle Vineyards is located makes for superior growing conditions producing excellent fruit, according to O'Herron. Since grapevine roots must penetrate deep into the earth to find water and nutrients, hormon-al triggers in the plant forcing it to channel its energy into producing complex, concentrated fruit.

All Black Ankle grapes are grown and harvested on the property. Among the varietals planted and used for crafting their blends are Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec, Petit Verdot, Pinot Noir, Albariño, Chardonnay, Grüner Veltliner, Mus-cat, and Viognier.

O'Herron said a quality product is imperative and they are dedicated to producing the best possible wines that some say compare favorably with the finest Europe has to offer.

Each of their 200,000 grape vines is hand-touched seven to 10 times a year to ensure they are healthy and cultivate optimal fruit.

For their efforts, Black Ankle Vineyards has won "Best in Show" at four Maryland Governor's Cup Competitions and was recog-nized in 2014 by the Washington Post as one of two Maryland win-eries that are "changing the way wines are made in Maryland." The winery's picturesque setting is reminiscent of a Tuscan winery or Spanish villa say its cus-tomers "The experience is wonder-ful, it's like I am on vacation or in Italy," recalled O'Herron of patrons comments.

"It's a great break from life. We are an hour from Baltimore and Washington D.C. and only about 20 minutes from Frederick City. It's good to get out, get a taste of nature." Black Ankle has Friday and weekend events with live music and food trucks. It operates as a wedding venue and offers private tasting parties, wine cruises, curated wine experiences, a wine club, and subscription service, plus an ask-the-winemaker online format "happy hour", found on YouTube.

Yesterday, Today & Tomorrow

Besides the tasting-sales building and sprawling patios, the property has a bank barn built in the 1800s (updated in the 1950s), a farm-house circa 1860s-70s, a ferment-ing building housing steel wine-making tanks, a wine aging facility with hundreds of oak barrels and a new storage-shipping facility.

The vines are expertly cared for by its seasonal team of 25, H2-A temporary agricultural workers from Mexico.

Other staff members include vineyard operations, and general managers, a director of marketing, a DTC (direct to consumer) manager, wholesale accounts, education/communica-tions, hospitality managers, special events and weddings coordinator, 50 tasting room associates, four wine club contacts, with O'Herron and Boyce as the proprietors and winemakers.

They recently purchased two farms in Montgomery County, one of which will be exclusively vineyards and the other a separate property that will feature a vine-yard/winery dubbed "Live Edge Vineyards" in Clarksburg, slated for 2026.

A third grape-growing property in Carroll County allows the business to expand even further. With these three properties, they added 430 acres, totaling about 600 combined acres on the three farms.

Getting On Board

O'Herron was asked to join MARBIDCO's Board of Directors. She has served since 2011, taking a break in 2016 and 2017, and is serving currently.

"I enjoy being on the Board and bringing people into the MARBDICO family and getting them growing. A little support makes a substantial difference," she said. "It fills a need and is a good role for the State."