

Joseph Appel
R A S Wines
LD 1670

My name is Joe Appel. I and my two partners own and operate R A S Wines, based in Portland, Maine. We began in late 2019, committed exclusively to producing high-quality wines from organically raised Maine fruit, specifically the iconic indigenous fruit of our region: low-bush Maine wild blueberries.

In addition to our love for wines that express the fruit, terrain and climate of where they're made, what most motivates us is a desire to support and celebrate the unique industry of Maine wild blueberry growing. This industry — the product of hard work done by multi-generational, small-scale family farms — is currently in tough straits. By making a high-value-added product from this unique fruit, and expanding the market for this product through our growing national renown and long-standing contacts throughout the international wine industry, we can do our part to support a sector central to Maine's agricultural history and future.

In that effort, in 2021 we applied to AIIP, and were awarded a grant whose funds we accepted in early 2023. Our application specified projects to renovate our winery, purchase high-quality equipment, and improve our transportation logistics. All of these elements are absolutely essential to improve the quality of the wines we make, and to increase the amounts of those wines we can produce. Without this ability to improve quality and increase quantity, we would be unable to meet the goals of our mission as we've described them in the paragraph above.

Central to all our projects are explicit plans to collaborate and cooperate with specific farm partners and others in the growing Maine wine industry. Our work requires a stable, supported work force, improved communications and logistics, and shared efficiencies in equipment and transportation.

Extending and expanding AIIP would help tremendously to expand the pool of operators who could contribute to this and other collaborative efforts. I know that we were aided immensely by the clear, straightforward, simple application process: none of us, nor many people we connected with in planning our AIIP-funded projects, has any experience in grant-writing or formal fund-sourcing, and we all very much appreciated the ease with which we could participate.

Such grants, targeted as AIIP has been toward producers and processors on the ground rather than third-party organizations, are instrumental in cultivating buy-in and follow-through from the folks doing the work. I very much hope that this program can be enabled to flourish in the future, for the benefit of all who are working with, in and on Maine's natural resources.