

PLOWSHARES

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COURTESY PHOTOS

As summer comes to a close, community members harvest grapes at the Junto Wine vineyards east of Seward.

From vine to wine

Junto Wine harvest season is underway

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN
scireporter@sewardindependent.com

The grape harvest at Junto Wine near Seward is more than an annual event – it is a full-circle moment thanks to months of hard work at the vineyard.

Aug. 10 marked the start of harvest season at Junto Wine this year, and Junto Wine business and tasting room manager John Siebert said it is set to be complete in mid-September. About 30 community members, including several Concordia University students, help harvest every Saturday. “We do it all by hand,” Siebert said. “We’ve got these cluster cutters that are kind of like a fork and you pluck every cluster off of each vine. Each vine can have up to 40 or more clusters on it, so we’ll have one person on one side and then another person on the other side of the vine.”

Junto Wine consists of eight acres of nine different grape varieties. Junto wine grows red varieties including Chambourcin, Frontenac, Marquette, Petite Pearl and St. Croix, and white varieties including Cayuga, Edelweiss, Front. Blanc and Vignoles.

The vines go dormant in the winter and Junto Wine prunes them from January to April to encourage new, healthy budding in spring and has its growing season in the summer. Then, the grapes



Harvesters at Junto Wine gather grapes by hand during harvest season.

are harvested as summer comes to a close.

“It’s truly the fruit of your labor,” Siebert said.

Junto Wine harvests one or two of the varieties each week during harvest season, according to winemaker and vineyard manager Chad Egger. Egger went to graduate school for viticulture, which is the cultivating and harvesting of grapes, at Fresno State in California.

After Junto Wine harvests the grapes, its employees crush them within 24 hours, then press them one to five days later depending on the type of wine being made. Then, they add the yeast and other nutrients to start the fermentation process, which Egger said typically takes around two weeks. Finally, Junto clarifies the wine and prepares it for bottling.

“I like picking the grapes, I like crushing the grapes, I like pressing the

grapes, I like fermentations, I like drinking the wine,” Siebert said. “So, really, I like everything about it.”

Siebert said the amount of grapes collected every year varies based on the growing season, but Junto Wine typically gathers about 20 tons. He said its numbers are still recovering from being knocked back by hail in 2022.

Siebert said everything the vineyard does during the growing season is to try to get as much fruit as possible and for the fruit to be high quality. Examples include applying nutrients, preventing diseases and pests, training the vines as they grow and covering the vineyard in bird netting to keep birds from eating the grapes.

“Everything we do in harvest is based off the sugar content, also known as bricks,” he said. “So, we try to get our bricks as high as possible when we harvest, and that just

gives you more to work with in terms of alcohol content and also the residual sugar in the wine.”

The grapes at Junto Wine have matured well this year but are a bit diluted due to heavy rains which leads to a slightly lower alcohol content in the wine, Siebert said.

Egger said he enjoys bringing in quality fruit at harvest and seeing the vineyard’s hard work come to fruition. The quality of the fruit gathered translates to the quality of the wine, and he said he likes that the harvest season allows him to gauge how well the vineyard is doing and make any necessary changes for the next year.

“You’re not replanting every year, so these plants will be there for decades,” he said. “The growing season before sets them up for the next year, and just keeps going like that every year.”



STEPHANIE CROSTON/SCI

Kellen Meyer of Plum Creek Seed Services welcomes attendees to the official groundbreaking Sept. 4.

Plum Creek Seed Services breaks ground at Seward Rail Campus

BY KEATON BURGESS
reporter@sewardindependent.com

Plum Creek Seed Services in Seward will eventually have a new home in the Seward Rail Campus after doing a groundbreaking ceremony there on Sept. 4.

Kellen Meyer, owner of Plum Creek Seed Services, said the current location at 2837 Walker Road is a nice spot, but it doesn’t have all the amenities and space needed for the business.

“We knew we either needed to add on to the current space or build something new,” Meyer said.

Meyer said he originally wanted to find land in the country, but with land being hard to find, he went with the Seward Rail Campus.

Meyer said he likes the idea of being in the rail campus because it helps out the town of Seward and gives him the amenities he needs.

“I love Seward County and I love to see growth,” Meyer said. “Anytime we can help our efficiency and our customer’s efficiency is a win-win. It makes life easier for everyone.”

The new location is not ready yet, but Meyer said they are working on the foundation and should have walls up by the winter.

Although the new location will not offer anything new, the new location will allow Plum Creek Seeds to be more efficient in what they do such as soybean treatment.

“The current building has been here since 2002,” Meyer said. “Certain things needed replaced.”

Overall, Meyer is excited for the new location.

“I’m excited to grow in my hometown,” he said. “I think that’s the coolest.”

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From Brazil to the breadbasket: Ribeiro to bring global perspective to local producers

BY HANNA CHRISTENSEN
scireporter@sewardindependent.com

As the area's newest Nebraska Extension educator, Matheus Ribeiro is ready to bring his global experience and passion for agriculture to producers in Saline, Jefferson and Gage counties.

Ribeiro, who now resides in Lincoln, lived in Brasilia, the capital city of Brazil, for the first 32 years of his life. He fell in love with agriculture there and earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in agronomy.

"I really appreciate agriculture as a whole," Ribeiro said. "I think these growers, they're definitely heroes, because every year they get themselves in a business where they plant, they don't know what will come of it, they don't know what price they will sell at. It's a very risky type of entrepreneurship, and those guys are doing that generations after generations, and fighting with all the problems, hail, flooding, all types of things."

Twelve years ago, he immigrated to the United States to get his PhD in entomology. He ended up

meeting his wife in the United States and decided to stay.

"I love everything about entomology, to be honest," he said. "[Insects] have millions and millions of years ahead of us in the evolutionary scale, and they have developed every single strategy and mechanism to overcome whatever we throw on them and what nature throws at them. They are, in my opinion, the best example of how an organism or animal can adapt to so many different environments."

Ribeiro earned his PhD in entomology in 2017 from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he focused on the risk of insecticide resistance developing in North Central soybean aphids to neonicotinoid insecticides. After graduation, he helped with the research and development of a non-conventional plant protection product with Crop Enhancement, Inc. located in California.

He then traveled back to Brazil and worked as an independent consultant on pest and disease management projects for coffee, soybeans and tomatoes in South and Central America. He said he has enjoyed



AMY HAUSMAN

Matheus Ribeiro is the new UNL extension educator for Saline, Jefferson and Gage counties. Ribeiro was introduced to the Saline County board of commissioners on Sept. 17.

learning about agriculture in different parts of the world and spreading the knowledge he obtains from each place.

In 2021, he returned to the University of Nebraska-

Lincoln and spent two years as a postdoctoral research associate for the Insecticide Toxicology and Crop Protection and Cropping Systems labs.

Last November, Ri-

beiro joined Nebraska Extension as an assistant Extension educator for water and cropping systems. He served Zone 10 with Clay, Thayer and Nuckolls counties. He switched to Saline, Gage and Jefferson counties on Sept. 9 because it will be a shorter commute for him, and he believes the area will provide a new set of opportunities to work with producers on regional issues.

"There's a lot of differences in agronomic economic practices amongst the state depending on the region you are in," he said. "Here, we have a much more concentrated production of wheat and some small grains, forage and much less irrigated area as well, in comparison to other locations, like Clay County for example, which is heavily irrigated."

Saline County Extension office manager Melanie Kunc is excited to welcome Ribeiro to the team, and she said he has showcased a strong ability to collaborate and connect with others and provide useful resources. She said Nebraska Extension's stakeholders and clientele will benefit from his

presence.

"He is not only very knowledgeable in his focus area, but he is open to learning, actively search for solutions and always offers a lending hand across programs even outside of his own," Kunc said. "When we spoke to him for the first time, he made mention that whatever problem a client is having is also his problem, and that has stuck with me."

Ribeiro said he is looking forward to helping farmers of all sizes in Saline, Jefferson and Gage counties improve their operations through site-specific management practice recommendations and continuous need assessments. He also hopes to collaborate with them to implement management practices that lead to profitable, sustainable, efficient, and resilient farming activities. He will also be part of bringing back extension programs such as the wheat and alfalfa expo program next year.

"Every day I wake up, my job is to help," he said. "It feels good to help."

Don't Learn Safety by Accident

With one in four jobs in Nebraska related to agriculture, ag continues to be a large portion of the state's economy. It also is one of the most volatile and dangerous industries. Follow these and other safety tips this harvest and beyond:

Equipment safety

- Be careful when approaching harvest equipment. Approach equipment from the front and get the operator's attention.
- Ensure the harvesting equipment is fully stopped and disengaged before approaching.
- Do not go near any

unguarded or otherwise running machinery.

- Avoid pinch points between equipment – such as tractors with grain wagons. Visibility can be limited, and serious injury can occur.

Entanglement hazard

- Before unplugging any equipment, disengage power and remove energy from the equipment.
- Never pull or try to remove plugged plant material from an operating machine.
- Never remove shields. Keep in place to avoid entanglement when working around equipment.

Fall hazard

- Be careful when climbing on or off equipment.
- Be alert and extremely careful when working in wet or slippery conditions.
- Keep all walkways and platforms open and free of tools, dust, debris or other hazardous obstacles. Clean all walkways and platforms before use.
- Wear clothing that is not baggy or loose. Also wear proper non-slip, closed-toed shoes.
- Use grab bars when mounting or dismounting machinery. Face machinery when dismounting and never jump from equipment.

ment.

- Never dismount from a moving vehicle.

Fire prevention

- Carry a fire extinguisher in your vehicle (A-B-C, 5 or 10 pounds).
- Check bearings regularly to prevent overheating and the chance of fire. Remove build-up or dust from equipment.

Grain cart safety

- Never exceed maximum weight limits on grain carts. As weight increases, grain carts can be more difficult to control.
- Load grain bins evenly to distribute weight and prevent weaving or instability across the grain bin.

and replace any worn or cracked tires.

Grain bin safety

- Check the air quality before entering an enclosed space.
- If entering a bin, wear a harness attached to a secure rope.
- Never work alone.
- Never allow children to get too close or inside the bin.
- Wear a dust filter or respirator when working in bins.
- Stay out of bins when equipment is running.

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Deadly corn diseases surge in southeast Nebraska

BY HANNA CHRISRTENSEN
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Cornfields across southeast Nebraska are threatened with a double dose of disease this year as Goss' wilt and Fusarium crown rot are becoming increasingly prevalent.

As farmers prepare for harvest, knowing what to look for, what steps to take and how to prevent future outbreaks are crucial aspects of minimizing their damage.

Jenny Rees, Nebraska Extension educator for Seward, York and Fillmore counties, believes the increase in corn diseases may be due to a stressed environment of extreme hot and cold weather, the heavy hail storms during 2022 and 2023 and plants getting too much or too little water.

"I think what happened is the pathogens basically just increased in their number in their fields, and we may not have had hybrids that were resistant to those pathogens," she said. "I think we were just building up the bacteria in our fields and didn't realize that, and then it just really showed itself this year."

Fusarium crown rot can

be seen in the corn's stalk or root, and Goss' wilt can be found in the leaves and stalk. Neither of them necessarily spread but rather they grow in patches.

Rees said systemic Goss' wilt has been especially common in Seward, York and Hamilton counties this year and can often be identified by cutting a cross-section of the corn stalk. If there is orange/brown discoloration on the vascular bundles, the plant may have systemic Goss' wilt.

Foliar Goss' wilt is also becoming more common, but if the whole plant is dying it likely contains the systemic version of the bacterium, as well.

Fusarium crown rot is marked by plants that are broken or bent a few nodes above the soil line, have rot at the root crown of the plants and/or have pink/white fungal growth outside of the nodes.

Both diseases cause crops to die early.

There is nothing producers can do to reverse the disease, so Rees rec-



COURTESY PHOTO

Fusarium crown rot causes corn to break above the soil line and fall over.

ommends they harvest any disease-ridden plants early to minimize its effects. To prevent the disease from coming back next year, producers should talk to their seed dealer about disease tolerance.

"One way to help is they

can rotate to a different crop, like soybeans or sorghum or wheat, but if they are a corn-on-corn situation, then what they want to do is use a different hybrid next year," she said.

Rees said growers should check their crops

early, and those who suspect they may have a corn disease should talk to an agronomist.

"As people are driving combines through fields and they start noticing yield loss in certain areas, we always get the ques-

tions as to what happened here," she said. "It is so hard to diagnose things at harvest when there's nothing that's alive yet, so it's better to be just checking fields now and looking at things before they get in the combines."

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'Try something'

Cover crops field day held near Milligan

On a hot and breezy late summer afternoon, a fleet of pickup trucks lines the side of a gravel road one mile south of Milligan.

Golden, ripening corn and soybean fields stretch into the distance on all sides as about 40 people follow local farmer Jordan Uldrich into the one section of farmland that looks different from all that surrounds it.

Here, a lush growth of cover crops fills the wide space between the rows of corn.

When it comes to cover crops and other soil health practices, "it's worth trying," Uldrich tells the audience gathered in his field. This season, Uldrich was trying some things for the first time. With a goal of using less inputs and suppressing weeds, Uldrich used a five-acre patch of dryland corn to experiment.

Uldrich invited producers to view his test plots during a recent field day event hosted by the Upper Big Blue Natural Resources District and The Nature Conservancy. The event drew area growers who were curious about getting started with cover crops on their acres, as well as those who are already implementing soil health practices and are enthusiastic about the results.

The field day was an opportunity to see the results of Uldrich's experiments up close and to ask questions of the grower as well as a handful of staff members from agencies including USDA-NRCS, UNL Extension, Pheasants Forever, the NRD, Nature Conservancy, and the Department of Natural Resources.

Participants mostly came from the Upper Big Blue district area, but some came from as far as Sioux City, Iowa. Part of the draw of the event was the chance to network and learn what other producers are doing in the area.



COURTESY PHOTO

About 40 people recently attended a field day event hosted by the Upper Big Blue Natural Resources District and The Nature Conservancy at the Jordan Uldrich farm near Milligan to look at his methods of planting cover crops and other soil health practices.

When discussing his motivation for the summer's experimentation, Uldrich said he "wasn't trying to win a yield contest," but rather, he was interested in testing strategies for weed suppression, especially for palmer amaranth, and seeing if there was an economical way to use less chemical inputs while maintaining a profitable yield.

"Nitrogen management is essential to weed management," said Uldrich, explaining that where you have excess nitrogen, you'll have more weeds. "I'm getting serious about judicious use of nitrogen when we are trying to control weeds."

Each plot had 30 pounds of nitrogen applied in the spring. On four of the test plots, Uldrich applied 55 pounds of nitrogen and 20 pounds of sulfur in-season. The fifth plot had no additional fertilizer applied after the 30 pounds in the spring.

None of the plots had fungicides or insecticides applied, except for what was on the pretreated, conventional seed. Uldrich added a few different biological products and all five plots were planted into a

rye cover crop that had been chemically terminated six days before planting.

One plot included a conventional herbicide program in 30" rows with no cover crops. The other four all included an eight-way cover crop mix interseeded at V3-V4, with varied row spacing and nutrient application.

The Upper Big Blue NRD assisted Uldrich in planting his cover crop with an interseeder. The land had been no-till for 20 years; however, this was the first season Uldrich had experimented with cover crops.

The cover crop mix on the test plots included forage peas, mung beans, berseem clover, oats, turnips, impact forage collards, buckwheat, and pie pumpkins. It had been fairly dry for the last six weeks prior to the field day, however, when Extension Educator Jenny Rees lifted a spade of soil from between the rows among the cover crops, she noted subsurface moisture present, as well as good soil structure.

When it came to pest control, Uldrich noted the grasshoppers were "in the covers, not the corn," as were the Japanese

beetles.

"They'd rather chew on the covers. Give them something succulent to chew" if you want them to leave your primary crop alone, he told his fellow farmers. "The healthier the soil, the more likely you are to have the bugs that will help you."

Field day participant Don Hilger grows organic popcorn and does custom seeding and seed cleaning. He's a fan of cover crops for a few reasons.

"If you get your nutrients right, it attracts the beneficial bugs, and the bad bugs don't like the sugar content of your healthy plants," he said. "If you have nitrogen and phosphorus in the soil but don't have the biological activity, you can't access the nutrients."

Hilger said he tests regularly through the season to determine which nutrients to add and in what quantity on his acres.

Uldrich's test plots revealed varying levels of success. Uldrich plans to analyze results after harvest and expand on the most successful practices in the next growing season. He's also considering carbon market

influences, including how much carbon the various practices would capture and whether that will offset the cost of some yield loss.

He plans to do more acres of cover crops and continue to reduce inputs, utilizing SAP testing to provide a road map for nutrient application in-season.

When it came to the various row spacing, Uldrich suggested there is no one size fits all approach, but that spacing should depend on what you're trying to do. If you have cows that you want to graze on the cover crop, 60-inch rows are ideal.

"Cows are the perfect bioreactor on the fields. Buffalo built the soil. The closest we've got now is grazing cattle," he said.

If you are looking for weed suppression, 30-inch rows work best. Why is he so concerned about weed control? He predicts that in 10 years we will not be able to control aggressive weeds with chemical means due to herbicide resistance.

"I'm trying to get ahead of that curve. Biology has a lot more to do with it than chemicals," he said.

Uldrich plans to plant a rye cover crop this year after harvest as well.

"Have something green out there year-round," he told his audience.

When you do, you'll continue pumping exudates into the soil where the plants can access it, creating an exchange of nutrients.

Uldrich suggested that everyone "find the back four acres and try something."

"It's a worthwhile endeavor. If everyone can take one step in the right direction, we don't all have to sprint to the finish line," he said.

Farmers interested in funding for cover crops and other soil health practices in the Upper Big Blue Natural Resources District can contact Jerod Fling at jfling@upperbigblue.org or (402) 366-5272.



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