

VESTA Student Biography: Denise Cimmarrusti

By Emily Gray

“Follow your heart, but be realistic.”

This piece of her own advice has led VESTA student Denise Cimmarrusti down an ever-evolving educational and career path in the wine and grape industry.

A curiosity in horticulture is what sparked Cimmarrusti’s desire to work with grapes. She first enrolled in the University of Illinois Kane County Master Gardeners Program to pursue this interest. In 1998, she completed the program and was certified as a Master Gardener. Upon completing the program, Cimmarrusti volunteered at the University of Illinois St. Charles Research Center. It was there that she was exposed to the experience of working with grapes.



Cimmarrusti found working with grapes to be the most interesting and challenging aspect of her studies in horticulture. Being a home winemaker herself, she decided to explore the area further and enroll in the VESTA program.

“(The VESTA) courses gave me a wealth of knowledge and that, with the partnering of the work with grapes, gave me a solid career foundation,” Cimmarrusti said.

In 2004, Cimmarrusti was hired at the St. Charles Horticulture Research Center as their Viticulture Technician. There she conducted grape research work while continuing to work on her Associate Degrees of Applied Science in Viticulture and Enology with VESTA.

The next year brought even more opportunities for Cimmarrusti. She was hired as a vineyard consultant at AcquaViva in Illinois' Kane County. Cimmarrusti's position at the vineyard and winery, owned by the Brandonisio family, has since evolved from the planning and development of the vineyard, training the vineyard personnel, and troubleshooting viticulture issues, to the design and layout of the winery's production facility and the procurement of processing equipment.



“Taking classes through VESTA has given me a solid foundation in which to put into practice the things I have learned,” Cimmarrusti explained. “Through lectures, course materials, expert instruction and practical hands on experience, I have gained the knowledge of what is required to establish and manage a vineyard as well as the knowledge to further my winemaking skills and take the next step.”

This next step for Cimmarrusti will come in April when she begins her new position at AcquaViva as their Winery Operations Manager & Winemaker. Thanks to VESTA and her previous work experiences, she feels that she will be able

supervise the management of the vineyards at AcquaViva successfully. Cimmarrusti credits her VESTA classes as being very beneficial in her career.

“Each course has built upon the knowledge gained from previous courses and I have gained tremendous benefit from the whole program,” Cimmarrusti said.

Despite the knowledge she has gained, Cimmarrusti admits that growing grapes and making wine are challenging careers. She recommends VESTA courses for anyone interested in starting a vineyard or winery. In her opinion, the courses offer a variety of learning opportunities and provide the type of knowledge that is needed for a successful operation in the Midwest.

The challenges may be numerous, but Cimmarrusti finds her work quite rewarding.

"Sharing what I have learned with others is one of the most rewarding aspects of my involvement in the grape and wine industry and that is a tremendous reward in itself." said Cimmarrusti. "But the people I have met along the way have been the most rewarding aspect in all this. I have been fortunate enough to meet some really wonderful people."

Cimmarrusti plans to spend much of her time in the near future at AcquaViva getting ready for the grand opening of the winery. Her future educational goals include continuing her studies of viticulture and enology, with a focus on wine microbiology. Ultimately, Cimmarrusti said that she would like to gain more educational and work experience as an overseas wine maker in Italy.

AcquaViva Vineyard is located at 47W614 Rt. 38 and Meredith Road in Maple Park, Illinois. The winery, set to open in this summer, will be located directly across the street from the vineyard. For general information about the operation, contact Denise by email at dcimmarr@aol.com.