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Finger Lakes tourism gets a lift

Wine, arts centers should help boost Canandaigua's businesses

Amy Wu
Staff writer

Wick-edly Sent, a soap and candle store, has given its employees more hours. Sweet Expressions, which sells novelty chocolates, has expanded its "Made in New York" products. The Inn on the Lake has spent $2.5 million on the first phase of a massive renovation. Bristol Harbour Resort will soon launch tour and culinary packages with its overnight stays.

Canandaigua-area businesses are getting ready for what they hope is a banner tourism season, thanks to excitement surrounding the opening of the New York Wine & Culinary Center and the extensive renovation of and bigger concerts at the Constellation Brands-Marvin Sands Performing Arts Center.

On Thursday, dignitaries toured the performing arts center, formerly the Finger Lakes Performing Arts Center, which has undergone a $13 million facelift. Today, more than 100 politicians, including Gov. George Pataki, and tourism industry representatives are expected at the official ribbon-cutting of the wine and culinary center.

Both attractions open to the public on Saturday. The arts center will have free tours starting at 4 p.m., with evening performances by the Finger Lakes Concert Band and the Rochester City Ballet.

"This will really help business, as opposed to last year with (the) economy being tight and gas prices being high," said Don Stevens, co-owner of Wick-edly Sent.

"Everything helps," added Scott Mackey, the other owner. "It has to bring more people in."

Wick-edly Sent is showcasing its wine-themed candles, a popular item pegged to the growing popularity of Finger Lakes wineries. The business is brainstorming ways to partner with the wine and culinary center down the street from the shop.

The summer tourism season is key for Canandaigua, which anchors the north end of the Finger Lake bearing the same name. Tourism revenue comprises 30 percent to 35 percent of sales generated in the city, according to research done by the Canandaigua Chamber of Commerce.

Canandaigua is the county seat of Ontario County, which about 1.5 million people visited in 2003, spending $90 million, according to sales tax data analyzed by the Empire State Development Corp. That was the most recent data available.

For the 14-county Finger Lakes region, tourism added $2.18 billion to the economy in 2004 and 2005, according to the New York state Tourism Promotion Agency Council, a nonprofit that tracks the industry.

About 24 million people each year visit the 14-county Finger Lakes region. The wine and culinary center's goal is to increase that number by 5 percent in five years' time.

"This has huge potential, if the numbers they predict are correct. This has huge potential to contribute to
our economy," said Andrew Harkness, president of the Canandaigua chamber.

The performing arts center, in the nearby town of Hopewell on the campus of Finger Lakes Community College, also hopes to increase its draw by thousands because the expanded stage and additional seats under the shell make it worthy competition to the area's other large outdoor concert venue, Darien Lake. Among this year's acts: Bonnie Raitt, Johnny Mathis and Larry the Cable Guy.

The latest boost comes in large part because of the Sands family. The late Marvin Sands founded Canandaigua Wine Co., which grew to become Constellation Brands Inc., the world's largest wine company.

Sands' sons, Richard and Robert, conceived of the wine and culinary center as they saw what other wine regions had established while researching companies for Constellation to acquire. They persuaded Wegmans Food Markets Inc., Rochester Institute of Technology and the New York Wine & Grape Foundation to sign on as partners.

"We believe that certainly Canandaigua should be the center of the New York state wine industry," said Richard Sands, Constellation's chairman and chief executive. "Given Constellation Wine's presence in Canandaigua and Naples ... it makes sense that Canandaigua should be the launching off point" to promote the industry.

The Sandses have also donated money to other Canandaigua organizations such as Thompson Health, the YMCA and Sonnenberg Gardens & Mansion.

Constellation is "one of the major employers (in the region) and Marvin Sands (was) one of the nicest men I've ever met," said Jeff Anthony, owner of Dick Anthony, a men's clothing shop, who added that the family's contributions to Canandaigua are immeasurable.

The Sands family also owns principal interest in the Inn on the Lake next door to the new wine and culinary center, which anchors the south tip of Main Street at the lake.

The upscale hotel, which completed $2.5 million in renovations in May, plans more changes at the property. The upgrade included a new restaurant, Max on the Lake, operated by noted Rochester restaurateur Tony Gullace.

The inn plans joint packages, such as accommodations and cooking classes, with the center.

Nearby restaurants and bars have tapped into the gold mine by expanding their wine menus. There is talk of local restaurants featuring the center's cooking-class dishes with hopes of drawing in more customers, said the chamber's Harkness.

While the early beneficiaries of the center are expected to be hotels, restaurants, gasoline stations and retailers, area officials hope the new venues will result in offshoot industries.

"It's not just more tourists, there will be another wave in a year or two," said Harkness. "In the longer term it supplies more business in the area, it will generate taxes. A lot of the jobs will be good for younger people."

AWU@DemocratandChronicle.com

By the numbers

24 million: Number of visitors to the 14-county Finger Lakes region each
$2.18 billion: Total annual tourism spending for Finger Lakes region.
3.24: Average number of nights that visitors stay.
$88.80: Average amount spent per person per day.
1.5 million: Number of visitors to Ontario County, including Canandaigua.
$90 million: What visitors spent in Ontario County.

SOURCES: The New York state Tourism Promotion Agency Council, the Finger Lakes Tourism Alliance, Finger Lakes Visitors Connection, the Empire State Development Corp.