



# Heard it Through the Grapevine

District Sun brings solar power to Finger Lakes wineries



*In 2015, District Sun brought together four wineries on a joint solar project, designing a customized solar solution for each vineyard to address unique features of topography, building structures, priorities and brand considerations.*

**T**he O-neh-da Vineyards was founded during the close of the Civil War by a Catholic bishop who could find no wine that was 100 per cent pure grape wine as required for the celebration of mass. Located on Hemlock Lake, O-neh-da carries on the tradition of making sacramental wine and its sister winery, Eagle Crest, produces other varietals. Hemlock is pristine and unspoiled, one of only two of the 11 Finger Lakes to have no residential buildings and, as a protected watershed for Rochester, prohibits swimming and motorboats. It is no wonder that unspoiled land on Hemlock Lake would have owners that gravitate to clean, sustainable solar energy.

## Solar as Sacrament

“Our heritage gives us great inspiration today to be careful stewards of the land and definitely animates our daily life. Installing solar panels is just a continuation of our efforts to use the resources that have been given to us by the Creator in the best way possible,” says Will Ouweleen of O-neh-Da and Eagle Crest.

John Wagner, owner of Wagner Vineyards and Brewery in Lodi, New York, agrees. “I had been researching solar for five years because it’s a natural progression for us. We have made our livelihood for generations by harnessing the energy from the sun. We are stewards of the land, the water, the air and we want to move towards more renewable sources of energy. It makes economics almost a secondary issue,” Wagner says.

## Bottling the sun

But economics have nevertheless played a significant role in commercial solar due to a number of factors. When people think about agricultural operations, for example, they don’t often equate them with intensive electrical use, but wineries’ annual electric bills are often one of their largest expenditures. Vintners do a great deal of heating and cooling, run presses and filters, not to mention other heavy equipment involved in the wine-making process.

“Buying electricity is a big, big part of our costs,” Wagner says. “Solar is really going to cut costs and it’s just the right thing to do.”

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“The business is very capital intensive,” agrees Meaghan Frank of Dr. Konstantin Frank Wine Cellars. “[Solar is] a no-brainer. You’re going to save money, you’re doing good for the environment, you’re moving the business to a cleaner, more efficient energy. There are no drawbacks from my perspective.”

## Less taxing on the bottom line

Major factors increasing the allure of solar projects are the state and federal incentives that have made solar energy exceedingly affordable, and perhaps one of the most attractive investments an organization can make. Most commercial solar projects pay for themselves in eight years or less, although the lifespan of a solar array is about 25 years.

“We’re on a seven-year payback,” reports Frank. “Our local bank provided the financing and we didn’t have to put up any upfront money. Instead of paying the utility bill, we’re paying the bank and it will be paid off in seven years. Then our electricity is literally provided for free by the sun.”

“There’s also a federal tax credit. If you’re showing a profit with your business, it’s a tax credit, not a tax deduction,” Ouweleen points out. “It’s a dollar-for-dollar credit, so if you show \$50,000 in profit in a given year, you could have a \$50,000 tax credit.”

## Red wine, not red tape

Navigating the incentives and permits can be overwhelming for most small and mid-sized businesses and non-profit organizations, which is where District Sun has differentiated itself. Not only is the firm an experienced and highly professional design and engineering firm, but it provides “soup-to-nuts” services – detailing all applicable incentives and rebates, helping complete applications, permits and other paperwork, providing detailed customized drawings of the solar arrays and even working with the customer’s commercial lenders-of-choice to cement the financing specifics.

“Working with District Sun has been fantastic, because we haven’t had to do it alone, which was a really tough pull for us,” says Frank. “It takes so much time and energy and you really need a specialist to move your project forward. It was really key having District Sun walk us through the process.”

“There’s a lot of involved spreadsheets and schedules and rebates and grants and – even though I have a history as a professional grant writer – I didn’t have the time to focus on maximizing all of the benefits at the federal and the state level. That is one of the many value-added aspects of District Sun. District Sun took care of everything and even communicated to the bank what our project scale would be, and what the incentives would be, so the bank could focus on the net principal we would need. I honestly didn’t do anything. It was all District Sun,” reports Ouweleen.

## Future-proof wine

As commercial solar has become more viable, a number of companies have sprung up around the country, using the cache of solar energy to cash in, without the expertise to follow-through on the complexities presented by differing utility companies and individual access to grids, customized engineering and a myriad of official processes.

“Some owners had been playing with the idea for five years or more and had that many proposals to show for it. Most considered solar for all the right reasons, but the projects never gained traction because of cost, the morass of paperwork, and the inexperience of many solar providers,” Ouweleen reports. “District Sun had national expertise – over 300 installations – and I knew that I could trust them, so I could concentrate on my business, which is growing grapes. Nowhere did I feel like the project was being over-engineered, or was experiencing project-creep because I knew that [District Sun] had our interests in mind, so we’d have exactly the right size system.”

## Local labor, local lenders, domestic panels

District Sun also relies on local labor and domestic products for its projects. It oversees local construction and electrical contractors to install American-made photovoltaic solar panels financed by local commercial lenders.

“One of the beautiful things about District Sun was -- while they bring a national database, knowledge and experience to our project – they work with local installers and local people, so that it has a net local effect. The dollars that we’re spending and investing in our solar array are going to help create jobs for local people,” Ouweleen says. “It’s an investment, not an expense.”

“I discovered the warranties are excellent, the maintenance plan is beautiful, there’s not really a lot to go wrong,” Ouweleen says.

## A beautiful solution

Each of the wineries has a visitor program and tasting operations, making the aesthetics of its operations – and solar installations – of more than a passing concern. Here, too, District Sun has differentiated itself by carefully considering the aesthetics of its installations.

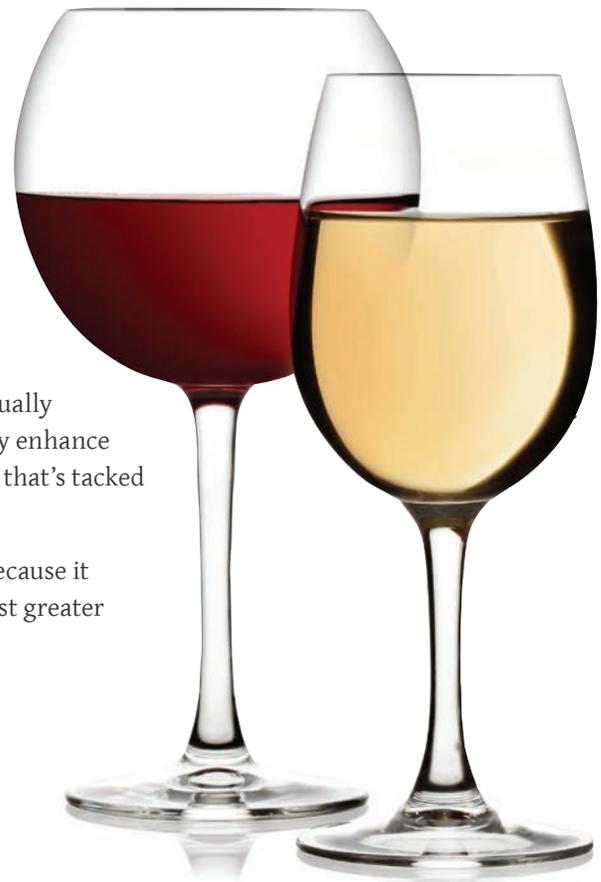
“How would it affect the roofs and the aesthetics? One-by-one we tackled those questions with District Sun and those things fell into place and really gave us a comfort level,” Wagner says. “Panels are actually on five different buildings and it’s been done well; [the panels] actually enhance the aesthetics on the roofs and looks very nice rather than an eyesore that’s tacked onto something.”

“And it is actually brand-building for us to have a solar installation, because it shows a greater stewardship of our resources, the sun’s energy, and just greater care,” Ouweleen summarizes.

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## About District Sun

District Sun's leadership has worked in the commercial environmental and alternative energy field since it became viable in the 1990s. District Sun's approach to commercial solar projects is unique in its transformative approach to clients, its advocacy on behalf of the industry, and the environmental stewardship it makes possible. District Sun brings the latest financials to the table – including tax incentives and rebates, likely commercial lenders, detailed return-on-investment models and bankable documentation – transforming client uncertainty into commitment. District Sun's comprehensive on-the-ground intelligence – including up-to-the-minute changes in energy policy as well as regional construction and electrical codes – eliminates obsolescence in favour of cost-effective innovation at manufacturers of solar equipment. And for every 100-kilowatt project District Sun installs, an equivalent of 65 acres of trees are enhancing environmental conditions for every year the system is in operation. Visit [www.districtsun.com](http://www.districtsun.com).

To see a video on the Finger Lakes winery project, visit [www.districtsun.com](http://www.districtsun.com) and click on Case Studies.



708 Greenwich Street  
Suite 5A  
New York, NY 10014  
800-315-4803

41 Main Street  
Suite #33  
New Paltz, NY 12561  
845-419-1941

4385 Recreation Drive  
Suite #210  
Canandaigua, NY 14424  
315-305-3060

112 Hardhill Road  
Woodbury, CT 06798  
800-315-4803

[www.districtsun.com](http://www.districtsun.com)  
800-315-4803