



Can Long Island Make World-Class Wines?

F&W's *Lettie Teague* finds great wines—including some of the best American whites she's ever tried—on a tasting tour of the New York region that leaves her puzzled about why local winemakers are so modest in their global ambitions.

illustrations by stina wirsén

CERTAIN PARTS OF THIS COUNTRY SEEM more like punch lines than they do places to live. The state of New Jersey, for example, or Toledo, Ohio. Both have been the target of quite a few funny songs and late-night comedy routines. Needless to say, they're not places where great wine is made. As the stereotype goes, great wine is made in glamorous locations (e.g., Napa or Tuscany) synonymous with money and prestige. And then there's the contradiction that is Long Island: It's the target of jokes (and the inspiration of many Billy Joel songs), but it's also the home of the glamorous Hamptons, and lately, the source of some very good wines.

Until recently, this last fact was more a rumor than a reality to me. While I'd heard that Long Island wines had improved, and some had even earned impressive critical scores, I still wasn't convinced they had really gotten dramatically better. I had some bad memories to overcome, too. In fact, the last time I'd visited the North Fork (the island's chief viticultural region), about 10 years ago, I'd tasted a lot of not-so-great wines, mostly high-acid Cabernet Francs and herbaceous Merlots. And these were the grapes that Long Island winemakers supposedly did well.

But in the past several years, I'd heard about other high-performing varieties—Tocai, Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc, to name a few. I even found some on wine lists in Manhattan. The new Borough Food & Drink, for instance, sells 13 Long Island wines. "Do a lot of people order these wines?" I asked after choosing a bottle of Wölffer Rosé. "They do," replied the waiter, a burly young fellow with an accent whose borough of origin (Brooklyn) was unmistakable. "They're getting more and more popular. I really like that one," he said, pointing to the list: the Dr. Konstantin Frank Rkatsiteli, an obscure white Russian grape. But alas, the wine is from the Finger Lakes, upstate.

They have been making wine on Long Island for much less time than they have in the Finger Lakes; just over three decades—which is either a very long time (to winemakers in places like the Sonoma Coast) or no time at all (to winemakers in Europe). The first vineyard was planted in 1973 by Louisa and Alex Hargrave as a bit of a lark. The Hargraves got a lot of attention from the press, and Louisa later wrote a lovely book about the experience, *The Vineyard*, a tale of professional accomplishment mixed with personal loss: The Hargraves divorced and sold Hargrave Vineyard some 10 years ago. The buyers, an Italian

prince and his wife, rather grandly renamed the property Castello di Borghese, and while they still make wine, they've turned the estate into more of a catering venue focused on parties and weddings. (Though perhaps the bride and groom business has declined; the winery is up for sale for a rumored \$9 million.)

The Hargraves inspired other would-be vintners, and the wines that followed (mostly Cabs and Merlots) were received with enthusiasm that later turned to criticism as the quality proved erratic. In fact, Richard Olsen-Harbich, winemaker at Raphael and a nearly three-decade veteran of Long Island winemaking (including a stint at a winery supposedly built on swamp), admitted, "There were a lot of bad wines in the beginning. I made a few myself." I admired several of his current creations, especially his 2005 Cabernet Franc, a great buy (\$18) made in the light-bodied, fruity style of a Loire Valley Chinon.

Raphael was one of 10 wineries I visited on my three-day Long Island tour. I wanted to find out if the rumors were true: Had the wines, especially the Merlots and Cabernets, improved over time? And were there other grape varieties worth looking at, too?

The Long Island wine route pretty much begins where the Long Island Expressway ends and the island splits in two. There's the South Fork, home of Channing Daughters and Wölffer Estate wineries and lots of grand Hamptons

homes; and the North Fork, home of 38 wineries and lots of churches and farms. Indeed, it seems there are even more churches than wineries on the still-rural North Fork, and their signs were every bit as compelling to me as any winery's—sometimes more so. My favorite was the sign in front of a church south of Greenport: "Our mission: To get to Heaven and to take you with us." (No Long Island winemaker offered as much.)

My first stop was Paumanok Vineyards, a few miles east of Riverhead in Aquebogue. Paumanok's proprietor, Charles Massoud, and his wife, Ursula, are highly regarded; they were among Long Island's earliest wine pioneers, having planted their first vineyard in 1983. It was a purely experimental endeavor in those days, said the genial Massoud: "We didn't know what we were doing." In an echo of Olsen-Harbich he added, "We made a lot of bad wines back then."

In the beginning they "played it safe" by planting well-known varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, though as Massoud said, "There was no evidence that these grapes would do well." But many decisions made in those early days were ad hoc, as few of the pioneers were wine pros. Kip Bedell, who founded Bedell Cellars in 1980, was in the oil business; Charles Massoud had worked at IBM.

When Massoud bought his vineyard, it was planted with almost a dozen varieties, including Zinfandel—a grape that requires a great deal of heat to ripen. And there's not a lot of heat on Long Island, at least not consistently.

Long Island winemakers, however, give this a positive spin: Their wines, unlike Napa's, will never be over-extracted or overripe. (Of course, in some years they might never get ripe at all.) Long Island winemakers like to

say they're geographically "somewhere between Bordeaux and California," but their climate isn't really like either. It's much more dramatically maritime, with the Atlantic Ocean to the south and the Long Island Sound to the north. There can be months of drought, or rain that lasts so long it can rot out a crop. Then, of course, there are hurricanes. As Christopher Tracy, winemaker at Channing Daughters, put it, "This is not a wine region for the faint of heart."

Even Long Island's best recent vintage, 2005, was a mixed success. After three perfect months of sun came eight days of rain in October that poured about 20 inches into the vineyards. Winemakers who harvested in time and whose soils drained efficiently had what they called "a vintage for the ages," while others lost half their crop or more.

Massoud did well in 2005; in fact, he made some of his best wines. One reason he cited was his vineyard's fast-draining soil, a loamy pebble mix that he asserted came by way of a glacier shifting from Connecticut thousands of

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years ago: "You could say Connecticut was excavated and dropped here." (I kicked a bit of dirt with my shoe, wondering if it once had a Greenwich address.)

Like most Long Island vintners, the Massouds make a fairly wide range of wines. Indeed, diversity is both the strength and the weakness of Long Island: There are so many different varietals cultivated (more than 20) on both Forks that it's hard, even after 30-some years, to say which ones do best. On the other hand, there's plenty of room for experimentation with some nonclassic grapes. Some of the most memorable wines I tasted weren't made from the much-touted Cabernet Francs and Merlots but from lesser-heralded grapes like Pinot Blanc, Chenin Blanc and Tocai.

For example, while I admired Paumanok's Bordeaux-style blends and an excellent single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (2005 Tuthills Lane), I loved the clean, bright, minerally 2006 Paumanok Chenin Blanc as well. But, says Massoud, even its high quality hasn't inspired anyone else to plant Chenin. Too risky financially, he said.

AND YET LIEB FAMILY CELLARS CAN'T KEEP its sparkling Pinot Blanc in stock. In fact, a sign at its tasting-room door warned visitors of a two-bottle limit on its \$35 bottling. A sparkling Pinot Blanc parceled out like a limited-production tête de cuvée Champagne? I was impressed by the ferocity of its following, and equally so by the wine itself, which was dry and fairly light-bodied, a surprisingly good approximation of a Blanc de Blancs Champagne.

The white wines of Channing Daughters on the South Fork were even more impressive, and even more esoteric. Their Bridgehampton winery is also, if not esoteric, then certainly unusual: a stretch of some 25 acres of vineyards set amid multimillion-dollar Hamptons homes. The winery's Christopher Tracy, onetime pastry chef at March restaurant in Manhattan, is just as unlikely a winemaker as Channing Daughters is a winery in an unlikely location. Tracy has had no formal oenological training, and in fact, his first connection to Channing Daughters was as a member of its mailing-list club. Long Island wineries are big on mailing lists. In fact, most producers make as much as 70 percent of their sales via mailing lists or from the winery itself. Very few wineries have out-of-state distribution.

While this makes sense financially—they don't have to spend money on distributors—it doesn't do much in terms of PR. How is anyone in, say, Chicago, to know how much better the wines have become if no one can buy them?

"We make between 200 and 500 cases of most of our wines," protested Tracy, an affable, long-haired fellow who looks more like a Berkeley grad student than a Hamptons

winemaker. "We can't really afford to get our wines into a larger market." But the winery's 8,000-case production was pretty substantial compared to many boutique Napa producers, who still manage to spread their wine around. Why couldn't Channing Daughters do the same?

Tracy, like other Long Island winemakers to whom I posed the question, just shook his head. The cost of distribution was too high. And he didn't want to spend his time on the road, promoting his wines; he wanted to be making wine. Besides, he added, the wines were in several retail stores and a handful of top restaurants in New York City, the world's most important market (something I heard from almost all the other Long Island winemakers I met).

But Channing Daughters wines deserve a larger audience. Tracy's Friulian-style blends (which include Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Grigio and Malvasia), and his wonderfully minerally 2006 Tocai Friulano, were some of the best whites I'd tasted from any American winery. "We think Long Island is a world-class region for white wine and rosé," said Tracy, who didn't think much of the local Cabernet Franc and Merlot.

And yet, a few miles away, Tracy's good friend and colleague Roman Roth produces both. His Merlots are partic-

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five long island favorites

2005 Raphael Cabernet Franc (\$18) Although not a complex wine, this unoaked, fairly light red has lots of exuberant fruit and a refreshing acidity that makes it a great food wine.

2004 Lenz Gewürztraminer (\$20) This Alsace-style white has been a mainstay of the Lenz portfolio for nearly 25 years, and winemaker Eric Fry has its dry, tangy profile down perfectly.

2006 Channing Daughters Tocai Friulano (\$24) Christopher Tracy is making some memorable wines at this Hamptons outpost, but this nutty,

minerally South-Fork-by-way-of-Friuli white impressed me the most.

2006 Paumanok Vineyards Chenin Blanc (\$28) Made from some of the oldest vines on the North Fork, this bright, slightly effervescent white has a pleasingly clean, almost stony finish.

2001 The Grapes of Roth Merlot (\$50) I did not taste a lot of great Long Island Merlots, but this one, made by Wölffer Estate's Roman Roth, stood out. It's rich and concentrated but not excessive—between a St-Émilien *garagiste* bottling and a Napa wine.

ularly good; in fact, the single most expensive wine produced on Long Island is the Wölffer Premier Cru Merlot (\$125). It's a stylish, well-made wine (although I preferred the basic Wölffer Estate Merlot), as is the Wölffer Estate Chardonnay, a well-structured wine with a purity of fruit unmarred by excessive oak. I also liked Wölffer's delicious and unpretentious rosé, a very good deal at \$14 a bottle.

The winery's proprietor, Hamburg, Germany-born Christian Wölffer, came to Bridgehampton in 1978, soon after the Hargraves, and planted his first vineyard 10 years later. Wölffer, whose showpiece winery would fit easily among

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those in Napa, was frank on the subject of the success and failure of Long Island wine. “Everyone who owns a winery is an egomaniac,” he posited. “But we must all stick together. We must be a family if the Long Island wine industry is going to grow.” Wölffer's are among the few Long Island wines that can be found outside New York. He is currently investing in another winery—this one in Argentina, because, as he says, “it's a lot easier to make money” there.

MICHAEL LYNNE, CO-CHAIRMAN OF New Line Cinema, is one of the very few Long Island winery owners who agree with Wölffer's expansionist view. Lynne purchased Corey Creek in 1999 and Bedell Cellars in 2000, and judging by the sign in front of Bedell touting its status as one of the “Ten Hottest Brands in America,” it's clear wine is serious business for him. The quality of the wines that I tasted, however, was mixed. While I liked a few of the Merlots, I thought new winemaker John Irving Levenberg, from Paul Hobbs in California, was too unabashed a proponent of new oak. “I'm all about getting oak into wine,” he declared—something no other winemaker had said, as Long Island wines are generally too delicate to handle a lot of wood.

At Lenz, things were a little less corporate. Lenz was one of the first North Fork wineries, established in 1978, and winemaker Eric Fry (whose hair runs halfway down his back) is a bit of a hippie and a local genius of sorts. Fry makes some remarkably rich sparkling wines, some aged as long as 15 years on their lees. (Fry also makes Lieb's sparkling Pinot Blanc and consults at other wineries, too.)

He and I tasted at a long bar that runs along the converted barn that was the tasting room. A banner above the

bar noted that the Lenz Merlot had bested other Merlots in a French-versus-American tasting that included Pétrus, but the sparkling wines and an old-vine Gewürztraminer impressed me the most. Both were true to their archetypes. The sparkling wines were as well made as any good Champagne; the Gewürz tasted like an Alsace wine and showed the character of the grape. Even so, Fry said his Gewürztraminer hadn't inspired any new Gewürz producers.

My last stop was Shinn Estate Vineyards, where I met with chef David Page and his wife, Barbara Shinn. Shinn and Page, proprietors of Home restaurant in Manhattan, bought the land in 1998 and made their first wine five years ago. They opened a small inn a few months ago, too.

While Page is one of Long Island's newest winemakers, he is confident of success, perhaps because Shinn wines have been well-reviewed or because he hadn't dealt with the disappointments of those early years. As Page said of those who still harbored bad memories of Long Island wines, “Those people are getting old” (something I tried not to take too personally).

The three of us tasted the wines around the inn's breakfast table, pausing when Page delivered a large omelet to the guests. I admired First Fruit, a pleasantly bright Sauvignon Blanc blend with excellent acidity, but I wondered aloud about the leanness of the Shinn unoaked Chardonnay. (Very few Long Island producers ferment Chardonnay in new oak, because the fruit isn't rich enough and the acidity is too high.) Did Page think wine drinkers understood his austere Chardonnay?

“They do in our tasting room,” Page replied.

“But your tasting room isn't the world,” I pointed out.

“It is the world,” Page replied quite seriously.

This exchange summed up the state of Long Island wines. In some ways, the winemakers' single-mindedness of purpose has been a boon. Christopher Tracy wouldn't be planting Tocai if he'd relied on the opinions of others, the Liebs wouldn't be selling sparkling Pinot Blanc and the Massouds would have pulled up their Chenin Blanc vines long ago.

But an iconoclastic outlook can breed insularity, a dangerous form of self-satisfaction that other regions in the world were forced to outgrow before they began making truly great wines. (I'm thinking of Tuscany in the '70s.) It's the sort of outlook that Christian Wölffer railed against, and one that will keep Long Island wines from ever becoming truly world-class. The potential is there, and perhaps a few wines already qualify, but world-class wines need to be out in the world—not just in New York. ●

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