

## EAST, EAST, EAST! STARS FROM THE OTHER SIDE

Until very recently, producers struggled to make fine wine on the USA's Eastern Seaboard. Today, world-class bottles are emerging from Virginia to New Jersey. Roger Morris profiles these new Eastern icons

Only 30 years ago, the handful of people then making wine on the East Coast of the United States were struggling to produce passable farm wines, largely because the climate was considered too hostile for them to grow *Vitis vinifera* grapes reliably. Yet today, commercial winemaking on the East Coast is flourishing, with literally hundreds of producers. Among them is a handful of small, iconic wineries that are generally considered to be world-class. How did that happen in such a short period?

Until the early 1980s, the region embracing the coastal states from New York's Long Island to North Carolina was known as a viticultural backwater that sometimes made drinkable wines, primarily from hardy French-American hybrid grapes that are now banned from France (except for the production of Cognac). It was accepted wisdom then that the Atlantic climate was too harsh—too humid in the summer, too cold in the winter—to grow *Vitis vinifera* on a commercial basis.

For the few winemakers, most of them self-taught, who tried to make commercial wine, an evaluation of “not too bad” was considered a compliment. With the exception of Zonin, which raised eyebrows when it founded Barbourville Vineyards in Virginia in 1976, no outside established wine company thought it worth the investment to put down roots here.

It wasn't until the 1990s that any significant production took place. And that evolved only after a few pioneers found the right rootstocks and the best selection of varieties, as well as instituting European-style vineyard management to make *vinifera* viticulture flourish, albeit not in every vintage. Today, many of these cellars produce praiseworthy wines, while others would find “rustic” to be a compliment. Most of the wine is sold in tasting rooms, which locals have adopted as the American

equivalents of neighborhood pubs. Those whose palates and pocketbooks demand sweeter, cheaper wines have their favorite places; those who were schooled on good table wines produced elsewhere have their venues.

Seldom do any of these wineries sell wine outside their region, so marketing and distribution costs are negligible. And seldom are their wines reviewed and rated by the national wine journals, since production is too small, with mainly local distribution. With the exception of Long Island and the inland Finger Lakes of New York, where Merlot and Riesling are being touted respectively as the best wines, there is little boasting about regional terroirs or regional commonalities. With the exception of ubiquitous wine trails, it is pretty much a case of each winery being left to its own positioning and branding.

This lack of commonality is even true of five wineries that have reached iconic status as recognized by press reviews, the appearance of their wines on regional lists in fine restaurants, and through a devoted coterie of followers who must pay high-end prices but still buy up all the production. Whether they are the best wineries in the region is debatable, but any list of top regional wineries that left them off would be deficient.

### The pioneer: Linden Vineyards, Linden, VA

When Jim Law established his first few acres of vineyards in 1985 on an abandoned hillside farm at the edge of the Shenandoah Valley west of Washington, DC, he took the added precaution of planting an orchard of heirloom apples—just in case the wine business didn't work out. “My main goal was to make a little money farming,” he told me during a recent visit to his modern winery. Fortunately, the feedback from his first wines was considerably better than “not too bad.”



Within a few years, Law's wine sales were booming and he needed to expand beyond his initial 6 acres (2.5ha) of vines. The apple trees disappeared. Today, Law's Linden Vineyard makes about 4,000 cases annually, mostly red Bordeaux-style blends, as well as Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, from his three vineyards, which total about 28 acres (11ha). His wines sell for about \$25–50 a bottle, and he almost always sells out each vintage. As is often the case on the East Coast, Law's wines are more like those of France or Italy than Napa Valley, the reds smooth with supple tannins. They are easy-drinking early, but they also age very well. Linden's Bordeaux-style reds from 20-year-old vintages are still quite lively and remarkably fresh.

A native of Ohio, Law was a product of the 1960s, serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Zaire and taking some time off to travel in Europe. His first wine job was in a winery in Indiana that grew hybrid grapes and paid him for his labor with free lodging. He worked briefly in a Virginia winery—one of the dozen or so that existed at the time—before striking out on his own.

Part of Law's success, he admits, has been due to the fact that Linden is located on the edge of a very cosmopolitan area—Washington—and started at a time when residents were hungry for produce that was good and local. “I thought that they would want simple wines,” Law says, “but they are more and more interested in finer things. They are interested, and they are involved.” The area's wine critics were quick to jump on the bandwagon, and visitors to a destination restaurant a few miles away—The Inn at Little Washington—found that Linden was the only local winery on the restaurant's sophisticated list.

Above: Jim Law at work in his Linden Vineyards, which he planted in 1985: “I always try to ask the question, ‘What would be the best thing we can do for these grapes?’”

Law's winemaking style is a combination of modern and traditional practices. He seeks a Chablis style in his whites, using old-barrel fermentation though seldom any *bâtonnage*. His reds tend to be concentrated—cold-soak and lots of early pump-over—with good texture, and full-bodied without being heavy. In fact, if there is a commonality among East Coast red wines, it is their lack of big, sometimes abrasive California-style tannins. Law prefers not to filter or fine but will do if necessary. “I always try to ask the question, ‘What would be the best thing we can do for these grapes?’”

In the 30 years since he started, Law has also become a sort of East Coast Robert Mondavi in his willingness to share knowledge and experience with other winemakers. He frequently speaks at seminars and conferences and welcomes other winemakers to visit Linden.

Recently, Law has gone through an extensive replanting program—because his vines have aged and because “I planted Chardonnay and Cabernet, but in the wrong places, so I had to switch some things around. That meant planting some Cab where the Chard had been, and vice versa.” Now that everything is back online, he hopes to add back another 1,000 cases to his inventory—which is a good time, he believes, to gradually phase himself out of winemaking while remaining the owner. An estate's winemaking, like its vineyards, sometimes needs to be refreshed.

### The experimentalist: Channing Daughters, Bridgehampton, NY

Christopher Tracy did not start out wanting to make wine, but when he did, Channing Daughters was certainly the right place to do it. Like founder Walter Channing and partner and CEO Larry Perrine, Tracy has a restless mind that has led him



to succeed in diverse fields—first in the theater, then as a chef with a *grand diplôme* from the French Culinary Institute in New York. And since 2001, as a winemaker.

Channing Daughters has long been the oddball in the array of wineries that have sprung up in the East End of Long Island outside New York City. When Channing, a venture capitalist and a sculptor, decided to establish a vineyard in 1982, he did not follow the crowd of producers flocking to plant vines in the flat potato fields of the North Fork; rather, he established Channing Daughters in the Hamptons region of the South Fork, an area better known as the East Coast Riviera of the rich and famous than for wine production. From the beginning, Channing and Perrine, his new winemaker, dabbled in varieties not grown in Burgundy or Bordeaux, also unlike the early growers on the North Fork. And Channing's large, modern sculptures give the winery grounds the feel of the lawn of an art museum.

Over the past decade, Tracy has taken the winery's outlier reputation to new limits. At the moment, he has 53 different current releases that come from 27 acres (11ha) of estate vineyards, plus grapes from Mudd's Vineyard on the North Fork. There are whites, reds, pinks, oranges, fortifieds, *pétillants naturels*, and a recently added line of "seasonal" vermouths. "I admit that I've pushed Larry in terms of making what I know will work," Tracy sighs.

It is his white varietals and blends—mostly lean and highly flavorful—that have gained the most attention from critics and customers. "The spectrum of what you can do with white fruit here is unprecedented," Tracy claims, adding, "The only thing that guides me is that it has to reflect the place, and it has to be delicious. The moderate maritime climate gives me flexibility and wide latitude."

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If his palate for what defines "delicious" is broad and eclectic, no one can accuse the former chef of cookbook winemaking. "We basically make the decision of what to do on the crush pad," Tracy says, much like a chef who is checking out new arrivals at the greengrocer. "It's bottom-up winemaking." Saying he "doesn't want to get too dogmatic," Tracy does minimal intervention and minimal introduction of sulfur dioxide, but he does filter before bottling: "I want clarity in my wines."

Whereas most wineries worry about brand dilution, Tracy says his consumers, including a 1,500-member wine club (he was a member who graduated to working at the winery), "want experimentation from us, whether it's with something classic or something new. They expect that from us. But even when we do something experimental," he confidently adds, "we're pretty sure it's going to work."

**The vineyardist: Va La Vineyards, Avondale, PA**

Anthony Vietri, the owner and winemaker here, grew up in one of those Italian-American families that settled along the East Coast and, having had little success in growing their own grapes, each fall purchased California grapes shipped across country by train to make their own wines. And having

Photography courtesy of Channing Daughters



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spent his early adult years working in the film industry and living in California and traveling extensively in Italy, he finally decided to grow grapes and make serious wines on his great-grandparents' farm in Avondale, Pennsylvania, in the middle of the country's largest commercial mushroom industry.

Almost 20 years after planting his first vines, and having experimented with growing several dozen grape varieties and clones, predominantly Italian, Vietri has settled on four basic wines from four different plots of his 7.2 acre (2.9ha) vineyard. While not classic field blends, each wine is made from one plot where several grape varieties are planted together because that's where they all grow best. "The soil basically chooses the grape," he says.

His primary white, La Prima Donna (which is actually an orange wine), is produced from stony soils in the southeast area of his vineyard and is a blend of Tocai, Malvasia Bianca, Fiano, Pinot Grigio, and Petit Manseng. His primary red, Mahogany Va La, comes from black mushroom soils at the center of the property and is composed primarily of Malvasia Nero, Barbera, Sagrantino, Carmine, Lagrein, Charbono, Teroldego, and Petit Verdot. There is also an unusual blend called Cedar, from five clones of Nebbiolo Lampia and Michet with Corvina Veronese, plus Silk, a dry, barrel-aged *rosato*.

"With La Prima Donna, I wanted a rich white wine, without any oak, that could show purity," Vietri says of his orange white wine. "With Silk, I wanted a *rosato* like Grignolino that my people [relatives in Italy] drink, a red when you don't want to drink a white."

Even though his wines—now all estate-grown and a mere  
 Opposite: The Channing Daughters tasting room as seen from the front lawn.  
 Above: Bill and Penni Heritage, whose three sons are also now in the family firm.

Photography courtesy of Heritage Vineyards

750 cases annually—have received recognition and customer demand almost from the time he opened his doors in 2002, Vietri has continued to work in evolving his vineyard, first through almost endless experimentation with combinations of varieties and clones, as well as shifts in trellising, canopy management, and pruning.

For a while, he did severe green harvests every year, but he has since arrived at the right combination of grapes and soil and winter pruning practices that virtually allow the vines to almost keep their own growth under control. "There are some vines that I never cut, never hedge, except at the end of the year," he explains.

But perhaps the most counterintuitive practice at Va La is an economic one. With success, most wineries automatically look for ways to expand production and thus revenue. Although Vietri purchased grapes from other growers early on, everything is now estate-grown, and he intends to keep it that way, even though there is no room for expansion at the farm. Vietri maintains he doesn't plan to buy or rent land elsewhere, which means that revenue depends on making stellar wines that will command \$30–50 a bottle. It's a challenge that Vietri welcomes.

**The accidental wine grower: Heritage Vineyards, Mullica Hill, NJ**

Bill Heritage is the first to tell you that he didn't start making fine wines because he was a connoisseur. "About the only wine my wife and I drank was white Zinfandel," he laughs. Instead, he became a wine grower out of desperation. In 1999, he took over the family fruit-growing business—mainly orchards—that had been its main source of income since 1853. "All I could see was red ink," Heritage says, deciding he

desperately needed to add a new cash crop. Blueberries were in demand, but the soil wasn't right. Someone suggested grapes, so he and his wife Penni attended a seminar on wine-grape growing being held across the Delaware River in Pennsylvania. He immediately came home and decided to plant an acre (0.4ha) each of Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay vines on the fruit farm.

He wanted to make wine from the first harvest, but Penni thought that rash. Although he turned over the crop to a local amateur winemaker, Heritage was now serious about not just growing grapes but making wine, which he knew was more profitable. And rather than give in to his ego and call himself a vintner, he instead hired a well-known California consultant—John Levenberg, who had made some of the 100-point wines at Paul Hobbs's winery—to train his newly hired winemaker.

Heritage turned out to be both smart and lucky. Levenberg was convinced the soil and climate at Mullica Hill were good enough for making high-quality wines. So, Heritage started a "Jersey" brand of low-end fruit wines to sell in the farm shop—which by now had added a tasting room—to cover the expense of planting vineyards and building a winery to make fine wine, which he was now determined to do. "Oak barrels are expensive," he says, "and we needed a way to finance."

Fortunately for Heritage, a New Jersey retail wine shop convinced the British wine guru Steven Spurrier and his colleagues to travel to Trenton, the state's capital, and hold a Judgment of Paris-style event, blind-tasting Bordeaux and Burgundy wines against those of New Jersey wineries. In the red-wine category, Spurrier and his judges gave Château Mouton Rothschild and Château Haut-Brion the highest marks. But the Heritage red blend beat out Château Montrose and Château Léoville-Las-Cases. It was not a fluke. The 2010 Heritage BDX Estate Reserve, which sells for \$70 a bottle, was awarded a 93 from the Beverage Testing Institute. Consumer and retail demand was quick to follow.

Heritage still has his fruit business and the cheap fruit wines. But he also has 40 acres (16ha) of vineyards on four sites and produces about 20,000 cases annually, much of it Bordeaux blends, Grenache, Syrah, and Chardonnay.

"I now have all three of our sons in the wine business, and Eric is working his way up as an assistant winemaker," Heritage says. And he has confidence that when the boys take over the Heritage business they will be seeing red wine as their future rather than red ink.

### The structuralist: Black Ankle Vineyards, Mount Airy, MD

Ed Boyce doesn't care much about how people describe the flavors they taste in his wines. "I am sometimes amazed at some of the descriptions sommeliers give to the flavors in my wines," he says. "You taste that? Really? But," he continues, "I do know how I want my wines to feel—clean, fresh, intense. I like length on the palate—without that donut in the middle—with smooth tannins, concentrated without being heavy. I want a wine that dances!"

Boyce and his wife, Sarah O'Herron, who is also involved in all aspects of Black Ankle's production, began searching for vineyard property several years ago, an extension of their longtime interest in fine wines. Both are involved in the financial investment business, so they spent weekends looking



for a farm that had poor, rocky, well-drained soil, and they found it in 2001 in a rural-turning-to-suburban area of rolling hills north of Washington, DC.

They planted 22 acres (9ha), harvesting their first vintage in 2006, and opened with their first release in 2008. Today, they have 37 acres (15ha) of vines and are getting close to the 10,000-case level, all estate-grown. Most of the grapes are Bordeaux, Rhône, or Burgundy (Chardonnay) varieties. The two tried somewhat infamously to do organic production in a region where the humidity and disease pressures are primary reasons why it had not been a wine producer for centuries. They were forced to give it up.

Although Boyce does have a French consultant, he is a hands-on wine grower and eschews lab testing his grapes for acids and sugar, preferring to let his own grape chewing do the job. The results have been that even his wines of substance, with lots of fruit, still maintain a vibrancy that is more French in nature than Californian. The Black Ankle Crumbling Rock Bordeaux blend, for example, has great fruit extraction and length of taste regardless of the vintage, although the 2011 has more density—"the year California came to Maryland," Boyce says. The Black Ankle Chardonnay has a tangy, full-bodied zestiness, with just a dollop of creaminess in the finish.

As with Linden, Channing Daughters, Va La, and Heritage, Black Ankle routinely offers wines in the \$30 to \$60 range, which may be another factor for its quality accomplishments. "You can't compete here at the low prices," Boyce says. "But at \$30 and up, I have no problem competing."

This type of thinking by all five winemakers was counterintuitive to what others held as regional gospel—that wineries had to low-ball prices, even if it affected quality, because they couldn't compete at the over-\$20 levels with California and foreign producers. While Channing Daughters and Linden now have something of a history to give them guidance, the other three are just barely past the 12-year limit for making high-quality wines. "After our first couple of vintages, we had no idea of how good 'better' would be," Boyce says. He and his colleagues are now finding out that there may be no limitations. ■

Above: Healthy grapes at Black Ankle Vineyards, whose poor, rocky, well-drained soils were exactly what owners Ed Boyce and Sarah O'Herron were looking for.