



# RIVERHEAD NEWS-REVIEW

Posted: Thursday, August 12, 2010

McCall stays true to the North Fork  
McCall stays true to the North Fork  
BY LOUISA HARGRAVE

Standing in the old potato barn and stable that is now his tasting room, Russell McCall gazes out at his Cutchogue farm and says, “I’m only concerned about two things here: land preservation and the quality of the wine. I want people to come here in 1,000 years and see the same thing. You can sum me up simply: I’m not going to put our label on it unless it’s above average.”

McCall has spent many years and a considerable fortune ensuring the preservation of this land, along with other environmentally sensitive sites in and around Cutchogue, where he grew up spending summers at his family’s fishing cottage on Peconic Bay.

After attending college in Atlanta, Ga., in the ‘60s, McCall started a small cheese shop there. At a time and place where the most familiar cheese was Velveeta, McCall doggedly persevered, succeeding once he changed his business from retail to wholesale. Supplying restaurants and hotels as Atlanta Foods International, he found a wider, more receptive audience. Soon he added a wholesale imported wine business, Atlanta Wines International. Being at the beginning of America’s burgeoning interest in fine food and wine (fueled by Julia Child and Alice Waters, et al), he was able to secure exclusive rights in Georgia and then South Carolina to sell many of the world’s most important wines.

While he was living and working in Atlanta, McCall had no intention of actively farming on Long Island. His urge to farm was already satisfied by a small vineyard he planted in Atlanta, where he rescued a rubble-filled urban lot adjacent to his wine warehouse. But he’d had his eye on the large tract of farmland due north of his Cutchogue summer cottage, knowing from his childhood rambles there that it was “a magical place,” rich with native artifacts (including traces of a 17th century Indian fortification, Fort Corchaug) and at risk of development.

In 1999, when he heard that the owner, William Baxter, had filed a plat to build over 80 houses there, he went to work with Peconic Land Trust, attorney Gail Wickham and Southold Town, creating an innovative plan that saved the 51 acres of wooded Fort Corchaug lands for the town and gave him ownership of the 54-acre open farmland, preserving all but a small lot forever as agricultural space. In 2001, he rescued an additional 47 acres of adjacent farmland, arranging for Peconic Land Trust to keep its original farmhouse as a stewardship center.

McCall hired viticulturalist Steve Mudd to plant 22 acres of his favorite varieties, merlot and pinot noir, sending Mudd to pinot-centric Oregon to select the most suitable clones for Cutchogue’s pebbly loam soils.

Until 2006, when McCall sold his Atlanta wine business, Mudd managed the vineyard and sold the fruit to various wineries, including Millbrook in Westchester, whose owner, John Dyson, also owns California’s celebrated Williams Selyem winery, known for its pinot noir.

Once he was free to spend more time on Long Island, McCall was ready to translate his own years of visiting the world’s top wineries into making wine from his own grapes. For the 2007 vintage, McCall hired North Fork viticulturist Ben Sisson to tend the vines and Gilles Martin of Premium Wine Group to make his merlot. But Millbrook still wanted his pinot noir. McCall, in his typical entrepreneurial fashion, made a trade that benefited all. The Williams Selyem winemaker, Bob Cabral, fermented the wine, keeping some for Millbrook and sending the rest to Cutchogue. The result is a light, freshly fruity ‘07 pinot noir from the Pommard clone, and a deeper, fleshier reserve from the “777” Dijon clone.

Some of the pinot must was “bled” off (saignée) as a rosé, named for McCall’s mother, Marjorie. Similarly, McCall honored Ben Sisson, naming his Meritage “Ben’s Blend.” Sisson died suddenly in 2009 at the age of 49, and is sorely missed. The wine itself reflects Ben’s substance, generosity and spirit.

All of McCall’s wines are approachable, fruit-driven and dry.

“For me,” says McCall, “sweetness is a cloak, always hiding something. Sugar doesn’t ever let honest flavors through.”

Honesty is a mantra for McCall. It reverberates in the handcrafted ambience of the farm, with its collection of old tools decorating the barn walls, its new zero-carbon windmill, and grazing Charolais beef cattle. Welcoming visitors who want a true North Fork experience, McCall says, “We don’t do bingo here.” But he sure does produce fine wine.

Ms. Hargrave was a founder of the Long Island wine industry in 1973. She is currently a freelance writer and consultant.

**Honesty is a  
mantra for  
Russell McCall.**