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# The Other Bordeaux Lies Closer to Home

Once lauded for its whites and rosés, Long Island's North Fork delivers some very good reds



F. Martin Ramin/The Wall Street Journal (3)

FORTY YEARS AGO, Louisa and Alex Hargrave, a young couple fresh out of Harvard, planted the first vinifera grapes on the North Fork of Long Island, undeterred by their own lack of agricultural experience. As told in Ms. Hargrave's memoir, "The Vineyard," the story of how they survived the harassment of various state and federal agencies as well as natural disaster seems almost miraculous. In the end, the trailblazing Long Island winery was a casualty of divorce, but the Hargraves' example brought others to this bucolic, sea-scented peninsula, where potatoes and fishing were mainstays of the economy and where there are close to 60 wineries today.

As a longtime summer resident of the South Fork (also known as the Hamptons), I've been watching the North Fork come of age as a wine region, often wishing the wines were better and more consistent. But this past summer I was deeply impressed by what I tasted, especially the reds from the 2010 vintage. I no longer felt the whites and rosés were the most successful wines.

One of the first to follow the Hargraves' examples was Kip Bedell, who started making wine in his basement in Garden City, Long Island, with a home winemaking kit while he ran the family fuel-oil business. In 1979 he bought a 50-acre potato farm in Cutchogue. Mr. Bedell planted vines in 1980, as did neighbors at Pindar, Lenz and Peconic Bay—all but the last still making wine

today. Mr. Bedell planted seven varieties, including Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Riesling, Gewürtstraminer, Zinfandel and Petite Syrah. The latter two were unable to handle the rainy climate. "The berries split," Mr. Bedell said. "We always get rain in the fall. But we noticed early on that Merlot did well and so we planted more over time. We could get it ripe most years, whereas with Cabernet Sauvignon you sometimes had to wait 'til November."

In 1999, Mr. Bedell was approached about selling the vineyard by Michael Lynne, who owned a house in East Hampton. A wine buff who was then co-CEO of New Line Cinema, Mr. Lynne had first visited Mr. Bedell in 1984 and believed that additional capital investment could take the winery to the next level. Mr. Bedell sold to Mr. Lynne in 2000 but stayed on as a winemaker until 2005.

The arrival of Richard Olsen-Harbich in 2010 seems to have marked a turning point. Mr. Olsen-Harbich's career making wine in Long Island stretches back 32 years and includes a stint at the Hargraves' vineyard. He was the author of the federal application that in 1985 created the North Fork of Long Island AVA (American Viticultural Area). "I don't think I could make wine in Napa," said Mr. Olsen-Harbich, who has taken Bedell Cellars to new heights since he arrived at the winery.

“The wines from Long Island keep getting better and better.” Merlot has long been the red grape of choice in the North Fork thanks to its earlier ripening, an important consideration in this relatively cool climate, which is more similar to the right bank of Bordeaux than it is to Napa. In recent years, Cabernet Franc, the other variety widely planted in Bordeaux’s Pomerol and Saint-Émilion appellations, has begun to contest Merlot’s hegemony.

Cabernet Sauvignon is less successful here, although Paumanok Vineyards, located in a warm spot in the westernmost part of the North Fork, has made some very good Cabs and Cab blends in warm years like 2007 and 2010. Beirut-born Charles Massoud, a wine-loving IBM +0.91% executive, and his German-born wife, Ursula, visited the Hargraves shortly after reading about them in 1979. Three years later, the Stamford, Conn.-based couple bought 43 acres in Aquebogue. They named the vineyard Paumanok, the Native American name for Long Island. Today their three sons all work at the winery, which turns out a dizzying array of reds and whites. The Massouds have been increasingly successful with Cabernet Franc, which Mr. Massoud originally planted as a blending grape. “It’s proven to be a strong variety for Long Island,” said Kareem Massoud, a 41-year-old winemaker who, after graduating from Wharton and spending a few years with a private-equity firm, trained under his self-taught father. “In a cool vintage it makes a lighter, Loire-like wine, and in a strong vintage it’s more Bordeaux-like.” The Massouds recently decided to plant three more acres of Cab Franc.



*Russell McCall at McCall Vineyards*

Until recently, Pinot Noir, the most finicky and maddening of red grapes, hasn’t been terribly successful here. But former wine distributor Russ McCall, whose great-grandfather bought a house in the North Fork in 1902 as a summer retreat from Brooklyn, purchased 110 acres across the street from the family home and planted 11 to Pinot Noir in 1997. He started bottling the wine under his own name in 2007. The wines are actually made at Millbrook Winery under the supervision of famed Pinot master Bob Cabral. I was deeply skeptical when a Hamptons sommelier

asked me to try the 2010 Pinot, but impressed enough to visit the winery last week, where I tasted among other wines an even more impressive 2007 Reserve Pinot that I would love to place in a blind tasting alongside some 2007 Burgundies. Stay tuned. A promising regional development is the trend toward blends of different varietals. Some of Mr. Bedell’s finest wines are blends, including my favorite Long Island white, Gallery, a blend of Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Viognier. Among the better red blends is 2010 Shinn Vineyards Wild Boar Doe, which combines all five Bordeaux varieties, as in a traditional Pauillac. Husband and wife David Page and Barbara Shinn were the team behind Home Restaurant in New York’s Greenwich Village, one of the East Coast’s first farm-to-table restaurants, which featured Long Island wines. Eventually they decided they wanted to make their own and bought the historic Tuthill estate in Mattituck in 1998.

Given the climate, Long Island wines will never be the most powerful on the shelf, but cool-climate wines—which are often lower in alcohol—are the hot topic among oenophiles, as more consumers and sommeliers balk at rising alcohol levels. North Fork wines have less alcohol than California wines, and flavor profiles that seem to split the difference between Old World and New World.

Until recently, the attitude of New York’s wine community toward Long Island wines seemed to hover somewhere between oblivious and contemptuous. But that attitude is changing, and it’s no longer surprising to see Long Island bottles on wine lists at restaurants like Le Bernardin, Daniel and Gramercy Tavern.

The locavore movement in fine dining, which prizes locally sourced ingredients, hasn’t hurt this trend, although it couldn’t have happened if the wines hadn’t been getting better and better. Brooklyn has become the center of locavorism, and the borough seems particularly receptive to its North Fork neighbors. Charles Massoud tells me that half a dozen Brooklyn restaurants serve Paumanok wines on tap. New York sommeliers are tough tasters, and their customers are—how to put this delicately—finicky? Trendy? Snobby? All of the above? Skepticism is still fairly widespread, but I would urge the doubters to try a bottle of Bedell’s stellar 2010 Musée or Paumanok’s 2010 Thirtieth Anniversary Special Edition, both red blends from a great vintage. Expensive at around \$100 each, though they certainly bear comparison with Napa reds costing two or three times as much.

Long Island wines are still seldom seen outside of New York state. They can be purchased online, although a more interesting way to taste these wines would be to visit this compact, picturesque region where a two-lane highway connects wineries and farm stands with 17th-century villages and fishing ports. The illusion that you have traveled back in time will be pleasantly dispelled by the sophistication of some of the local restaurants.