

# A WINEMAKER'S WONDERINGS

## IT WAS 20 YEARS AGO TODAY...

BY JAMES CHRISTOPHER TRACY



Photographs: Courtesy of Louisa Thomas Hargrave, *The Vineyard: The Pleasures and Perils of Creating an American Family Winery*

Memory is short. Often we forget the past and more recent events fill in our sense of reality. Not long ago I nearly tripped over a double magnum of 1988 Bedell Cellars Reserve Merlot while reorganizing our wine cellar. That year was a seminal one for the Long Island wine district: a great vintage, but also the year when the local wine industry invited colleagues from around the world to Long Island's first Maritime Climate Winegrowing Conference. This past August, Stony Brook University's Center for Wine, Food and Culture honored the 20th anniversary of that conference with another successful international wine symposium, "The Art of Balance."

In recent years the Long Island wine industry has taken off, growing in size and garnering ever more national and global attention and market success for its wines. But Long Island winegrowing was already thriving in 1988. Many people are unaware that this region has produced world-class wines since the 1980s and far

too little attention, respect and acknowledgment are paid to the pioneers of our industry and their early achievements. An article in this very magazine ("Wölff in Sheep's Clothing," High Summer 2008) used the inaccurate, and somewhat pejorative, phrase "joke to jewel" to describe our region's evolution.

To celebrate our industry's founders and thank them for the groundwork they laid, I reached out to four of our most important early leaders—Louisa Hargrave, Kip Bedell, Larry Perrine and Rich Olsen-Harbich, all still firmly entrenched in the East End's wine industry—and asked them to remind us of our recent past.

Larry Perrine, now CEO of Channing Daughters Winery, remembered, "Just over 20 years ago I had the pleasure of working as a viticultural research associate for Cornell University here on Long Island, helping to solve several key problems involving grapevine nutrition and liming, bird control and Botrytis bunch



rot control—using leaf removal around the clusters.” Now a common practice in most wine regions around the globe, culling sun-blocking leaves leads to riper fruit.

Perrine went on to recount (fondly) a seminal 1988 blind tasting event of six 1986 Long Island chardonnays versus six top California chardonnays, held in California with a dozen key winemakers in that industry. Long Island wines placed 1, 2, 3 and it ended with David Ramey (one of the country’s foremost chardonnay producers) stating to Perrine, “If you came here for advice on chardonnay winemaking style and quality I don’t think there is anything we can help you with. Just keep doing what you are doing.” In 1990, Larry received his first 90s in the *Wine Spectator* for his Gristina Vineyards 1988 cabernet sauvignon and 1989 chardonnay.

Kip Bedell, founding winemaker of Bedell Cellars in Cutchogue, still had a fuel company in West Hempstead when he and his wife, Susan, started the winery. (They sold the fuel company in 1990.) In 1988, “We tried hedging,” says Bedell pointing to a now-essential practice on Long Island that helps remove unwanted shoot growth that can wreak havoc on other vineyard operations like spraying and bird-netting. “We did all our gewürztraminer and maybe an acre or two of cabernet. We were pleased with the results and expanded it in 1989, a rainy year, and also began experimenting with leaf pulling. We were amazed by the results in that challenging year.” Bedell got its first 90 from the *Wine Spectator* for its 1988 Merlot Reserve, which retailed for \$14. “It was an exciting time for us. There was a huge learning curve trying to figure what worked best for Long Island. Most of the wineries were trying to make the best wines they could and open doors to people would know we were here.”

Rich Olsen-Harbich, now winemaker at Raphael, had already been in the region for eight years in 1988. “I was making wine at the Bridgehampton Winery,” he recalls. “At the time we were the only winery in the Hamptons AVA [American Viticultural Area; Rich is responsible for defining and getting approval for all three of Long Island’s AVAs]. We had just participated in the Maritime Climate Winegrowing Conference and had begun to learn a great

Our main markets were Suffolk County and Manhattan, which absorbed so much of our wine that very little was shipped out of state.

deal about how we grow grapes and what we needed to do differently: remove leaves, hedge, reduce shade in the canopies and utilize other training systems. It was the first time I met Paul Pontalier [from Bordeaux’s First Growth Chateau Margaux], who nine years later would become our consulting enologist at Raphael. It really was a watershed moment for the local industry, and wine quality across the board has improved since that moment.”

Olsen-Harbich also remembers 1988 as “the first great vintage of the region,” a hot and dry summer which many fledgling wineries at the time could take advantage of. “Many very good red wines came out of that vintage.” In addition, his 1988 chardonnay was honored as one of the Top 100 wines in the *Wine Spectator*’s annual round-up.

Louisa Hargrave, who in 1974 planted the first commercial vineyard on the East End of Long Island with her husband, Alex, says: “In 1988, the East End wine scene was flourishing. We had a core group of skilled winemakers who attracted international attention and respect from the likes of Hugh Johnson, Oz Clarke, Marvin Shanken and Frank Prial. Our main markets were Suffolk County and Manhattan, which absorbed so much of our wine that very little was shipped out of state, unlike many producers of a similar size in California, who had to come to the New York market with their wines in order to survive, and thus got more media notice as ‘nationally’ marketed brands.”

Hargrave also pointed me toward a too-often-forgotten review from Robert Parker’s *The Wine Advocate*, from August 1984, where he writes, “I continue to be amazed by the quality level of certain East Coast wines. When the winemakers in New York...get a long, hot, dry growing season as they did in 1982 and 1983, some of the results from the leading high-quality wineries can be dazzling.” Parker goes on to compare some of the whites from Hargrave to those of the famed Bordeaux estate Domaine Chevalier and says, “The 1981 cabernet sauvignon is one of the most exciting domestic cabernets I have tasted in the last year...and suggested the style of one of Bordeaux’s finest St. Juliens. These wines are widely available in New York and I highly recommend them.”

Enough said.

The Long Island wine industry “arrived” a long time ago and today’s leading producers will continue to be players in this wide world of wine, especially on the grandest of all stages, New York City. We cannot forget the past as it helps us build a brighter, smarter, better future. 🍷