

howard g. goldberg **Lured by Long Island**

Perversely, New Yorkers learned this summer that Long Island wine country had finally arrived by reading a *New York Times* front-page story headlined "It's a Tasting, Not a Guzzling, L.I. Wineries Remind Guests." *The Times* reported: "A million visitors a year visit the tasting rooms to sample award-winning merlots and cabernet francs. But this season, small signs bearing stern messages — 'No Buses,' 'No Limos,' 'Appointment Only' — have sprouted outside many of the wineries."

Inevitably, drunken misbehavior by visitors seeking a good time rather than good wine was bound to rise. The 30 wineries on the North and South Forks are a mere two-hour drive from New York City.

Free tastings have virtually disappeared as \$5 fees for a few carefully controlled pours have become the rule rather than the exception. Tasting room personnel are trying to cope with pushing and shoving by visitors who swarm out of limousines and buses.

The other side of the coin is that misbehavior problems, which producers with silver-lining outlooks might consider an *embarrass de riches*, may have been welcomed not many years ago when visitors slowed to a trickle in the off-season.

Droves of discriminating wine tourists now discover a phenomenon I have watched unfold since 1995 when I began a Sunday column, *Long Island Vines*, in *The Times's* weekly Long Island section. In twelve years, the region's wines have been improving by leaps and bounds.

In the first years, during 7 a.m. Sunday tastings in my kitchen, I often winced while critiquing, as I told myself, "yet another dog" — especially misconceived barrel-fermented Chardonnays that tasted like two-by-fours and over-extracted Merlots that could float a spike.

Every so often, after periodic runs of overpriced, overhyped third- and fourth-rate wines, I felt like throwing in the towel. But, hoping for better days, I hung in, and, by God, better days arrived.

Now I can hardly wait for new releases from the East End (as eastern Long Island is called hereabouts) in order to gauge how the vineyards and cellars are developing. Overall, I believe that the rate of improvement is accelerating.

While I don't like, and won't review, every Long Island wine tasted, in the vast numbers of local reds and whites that I try I no longer encounter flaws attributable to amateurism, even from the latest start-ups.

I share the view expressed by Serena Sutcliffe, the head of Sotheby's International Wine Department, that every next bottle, every next wine, is an adventure. No two are alike, and each pour brings pleasure or disappointment, but also opportunities for further education of the palate.

Today world-class wines are showing up routinely. Too many are too expensive, but the local economy can be partly blamed: Suffolk County is pricier than, say, Lake County, California.

A handful of wineries compete, in my judgment, for "Best on Long Island" laurels; among them (alphabetically): Bedell and its sister operation Corey Creek, Channing Daughters, Lenz, Macari, Martha Clara, Paumanok, Pellegrini, Raphael, Shinn and Wölffer.

Howard G. Goldberg, who contributes wine columns to The New York Times, is author of All About Wine Cellars, a guide that is part of The Complete Wine Cellar System kit (Running Press).

Importantly, with interstate shipping gradually opening up, consumers in so-called legal states can order anything these estates produce with the same confidence, or sense of risk, they bring to wine purchases in tuned-in neighborhood stores.

Because of my preference for whites over reds — a minority view among critics — I always look forward to the next round from Channing Daughters, in Bridgehampton on the South Fork. Its experimental works-in-progress whites tilt toward the spare, refreshing styles of counterparts from the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region, in Northeastern Italy.

The food-oriented whites that James Christopher Tracy, a former chef, makes here contain more flavor surprises than anyone else's. His gold-colored 2005 *Meditazione*, made from tocai Friulano, chardonnay, pinot grigio, muscat ottonel, sauvignon blanc, viognier, sémillon and malvasia bianca grapes, captivate the palate and mind.

Most wineries make one rosé or none. Tracy makes three Channing charmers, in stainless steel, using grapes from various North Fork vineyards: a merlot, a cabernet sauvignon and, from a grape that is a regional strength, cabernet franc.

To my relief, winemakers, catching the national tide against over-oaked Chardonnays, are increasingly turning to steel and older, more neutral barrels — a big gain, because this technique yields lighter, fruitier, zippier wines that easily

accompany the fish and shellfish that local waters (the Atlantic, Long Island Sound and internal bays) provide.

Sauvignon Blanc is getting bigger. Of a dozen tasted in May, Raphael's 2006 was outstanding, a tribute to vineyard manager Steve Mudd and winemaker Richard Olsen-Harbich; perfumed, vibrant, tangy, juicy, citric, complex — it had everything. Jamesport has always had a knack for Sauvignon, and its 2006 was emphatically herbaceous and flashy. Shinn's 2006 First Fruit (96 percent sauvignon, 4 percent sémillon) tasted of grapefruit and figs. Macari's crowd-pleasing 2006, a little herb-like and palate-cleansing, delivered hints of tropical fruits, especially melon.

Paumanok can be depended on for savory Rieslings and, a house speciality, Chenin Blanc. Lenz, using old vines, has long made one of the best Alsace-style dry Gewürztraminers in America. If a vintage goes by without my drinking a Pinot Blanc still wine from Lieb Family Cellars, it is a vintage wasted. I love Early Wine, a Chardonnay *nouveau* made annually by Helmut Gangl, an Austrian vintner who consults for Macari; it resembles Jungwein (young wine) found in *heurigen* (wine taverns that open at harvest time).

On holidays, I turn confidently to East End sparkling wines. Lieb's infrequently produced Blanc de Blanc, based wholly and unconventionally on pinot blanc, has been a winner. Lenz's Eric Fry makes a fine, profound, recently disgorged version. Successive vintages of the Christian Wölffer Cuvée Brut, made by the deft, German-born Roman Roth at the heavily bankrolled Wölffer Estate on the South Fork, can be outstanding. At Martha Clara, three fresh sparklers — a non-vintage Brut, a Blanc de Blanc and a nonvintage Brut Rosé — have shown Gallic grace. No surprise. Gilles Martin, the former winemaker, is French-born.

Long Island's pincer-like twin forks, extending into the Atlantic, beckon European vintners to skip to this promising New World outpost. When they come, consumers win. Of course, winning depends on staying sober. ☞

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