

Long Island Wine: No Longer a Long Shot

When I last reported on the wines of New York State – in **issue 165** – it was as someone who had only recently become seriously acquainted with viticultural Long Island. As I made clear then, the quality of the best wines issuing from what might seem like the unpromisingly supine finger that juts far into the Atlantic east of New York City is impressive – and steadily improving. The 2005 vintage – in which, despite autumn rainfall of historic proportions, many of the most conscientious Long Island vintners were eventually able to harvest their finest-ever reds – built confidence in their ranks that the worst nature could throw at them was surmountable. And since most Long Island estates have only been producing wine during the past two decades, it is just in recent years that most of them have been able to revisit their entirely mature wines, an occasion both for critical assessment and in many instances for well-justified satisfaction, perhaps even a bit of amazement at how well the project of Long Island viticulture has fared since its tentative inception little more than three decades ago. (For more about the history of Long Island wine growing, the island's geography, and those aspects of soil and climate that conduce to fine wine, please consult the introduction to my issue 165 report.)

Another boost to the self-confidence and economic security of many Long Island wine growers – at least, to hear them tell it – has been the extent to which only in the last several years have they at last been properly embraced by New York City's restaurant establishment and become by-the-glass as well as wine list staples. The proximity of this huge market as well as the obvious bottom line advantages of cellar door sales have meant that many of the best Long Island wineries make little effort to market to out-of-state distributors, and interested wine lovers who live beyond comfortable driving distance will simply need to put themselves on those wineries' mailing lists and take direct delivery. That said, a few outstanding Long Island wineries such as Channing Daughters are now affiliated with distributors even on the U.S. West Coast and in Canada.

Before it was over, vintage 2006 had engendered flashbacks to the deluge of 2005. But 2006 did not benefit from the hot, dry summer conditions that had accelerated ripeness and toughened skins in 2005. I was thus unsurprised when few growers showed me their 2006s. Yet, Shinn Estate, for one, demonstrated that reds of this vintage from the Bordelaise grapes – while quick to mature in bottle – could be absolutely lovely. The 2007 vintage has proven a great success in both whites and reds, with steady, long ripening enhanced by dry, sunny weather during the critical months of September and October (and with many reds not picked until November). "There was no pressure in 2007," remarks Wölffer winemaker Roman Roth. "You could wait across the board for full ripeness." For many Long Island vintners, this vintage – which veteran Charles Massoud of Paumanok Vineyards simply calls "ideal" – now represents the new benchmark. Relatively cool and intermittently rainy growing weather in 2008 has proven ideal for whites of focus and phenolic cut (though they were especially susceptible to a May 1 frost), but the vintage was more challenging for reds, and none of the growers with whom I tasted earlier this year was ready to show those wines, especially since most are currently offering their excellent 2007s, and in many instances 2005s. As for 2009, its almost perpetually wet summer will still be a vivid memory for most residents of the U.S. East Coast, and while early reports and tank samples that reached me indicate that enough late inning sunshine – along with Long Island's ever-important breezes – permitted white grapes at least to do respectably, poor fruit set and the need to rigorously select combined for at times drastic reduction in crop size.

That Long Island viticulture is stylistically in flux is to put things mildly. While the region's most prominent and obvious successes have been with reds from the Bordelaise grape varieties – with which it is possible here to achieve wines of more tender and forward fruit than that of classic Bordeaux, yet with lower alcohol and slighter frame than characterize New World regions like California – recent experiments with Syrah show just how wide-open and unpredictable things remain. Among the Bordelaise black grapes, Merlot and Cabernet Franc remain manifestly Long Island's most successful, with Cabernet Sauvignon a less reliable ripener and where it does prove interesting, usually in a supporting role very different from that which we associate either with Bordeaux or with most of the New World. There is a significant incursion of (generally over-priced) Petit Verdot, but judging by the results this must be driven by fashion and wishful thinking, spurred by the superficial appeal of a grape with potential for deep color and superficial fruitiness. That said, like Malbec, the Petit Verdot may settle into a useful supporting role at some addresses. (I half expect to soon hear about Long Island's first Carménère, though I can't imagine that grape doing well here.) Bruce Schneider has already demonstrated the amazingly Northern Rhône-like potential of Syrah in the North Fork's warmest sectors, although he was unfortunately compelled by circumstance to relinquish his rights to the Syrah vineyards with which he had initiated his program. I am still waiting to taste a red Long Island Pinot Noir that was more than merely good (and few are that), whereas striking successes with Pinot-based sparkling wines continue to add up and point to a promising trend.

In the realm of white grapes, Long Island's relatively low volume but diverse and distinctively delicious range conforms to few readily discernable patterns and issues from a wide range of *cépages*. As Charles Massoud remarked when challenged by me about the eight different varieties – half of them white – that he cultivates, "I am torn in two directions. Reduce the number of varieties to gain greater depth and focus on those that are left, or grow [even] more varieties to satisfy my curiosity as to what else may be possible. Ours is a young region, and we have not yet fully explored what will shine here. I would not know today which variety to discontinue." Employing whites associated with northern Italy, Channing Daughters in the Hamptons has rendered what I do not hesitate to call among the most interesting and rewarding white wines grown anywhere in North America. Yet, while wine maker Christopher Tracy says, "To have people plant more Sauvignon, more Pinot Grigio, more Tocai, more Muscat would thrill us because we think that year-in, year-out we can make world class white wines on Long Island," few fellow Long Islanders have given him that satisfaction. On the other hand, impressive if sporadic successes have been scored at other estates with Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer, and even Riesling.

The notes that follow were compiled on the basis of collective visits in New York City in January with a subset of Long Island growers as well as on the basis of samples subsequently sent me. (I last revisited Long Island in 2007, a year after filing my issue 165 report, and I published additional tasting notes on its wine values in issue 178.) Regrettably, time did not permit me to canvas the recent releases from several of those estates whose wines I had recommended in issue 165. Prices for Long Island wines have barely budged since my reports in 2006 and 2007. They are generally set on the basis of the ambition behind a given bottling or in inverse relationship to quantity, neither of which approaches have, in my experience, at all consistently correlated with quality. Less ambitious, less expensive cuvées are sometimes the most distinctively delicious, which in a region where growers are still exploring their talents and those of their vineyards is perhaps unsurprising, and which also helps guarantee many wines offering outstanding value.

—David Schildknecht

2008 Channing Daughters Vino Bianco

RATING: 89 points

PRODUCER: Channing Daughters



FROM: North Fork, Long
Island, New York,
USA

VARIETY: Proprietary Blend

DRINK: 2010 - 2013

ESTIMATED COST: \$20

SOURCE: eRobertParker.com,
#188
Apr 2010

Yet more creativity and outstanding value is illustrated by the Channing Daughters 2008 Vino Bianco, a blend of Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, and Pinot Grigio, with smaller amounts of the Musque selection of Chardonnay and of Tocai, as usual at this address vinified in various vessels including a new demi-muid and new barrique. A greenhouse-like wealth of flowers and foliage along with bacon and fresh apple greet the nose, followed by smoke-, white pepper-, and salt-inflected fruit on the palate. The balance of lees-enriched creaminess with luscious primary juiciness is impeccably struck and the wood entirely judicious. Relish this long-finishing delight over the next 2-3 years.

Under the direction of co-owner and Long Island viticultural veteran Larry Perrine and husband-wife winemaking team Christopher Tracy and Allison Dubin, Channing Daughters continues to render not just Long Island's but the United States' most intriguingly delicious and outstanding value white wines, utilizing fruit from Mudd Vineyards on the North Fork – with whom they've worked closely since the winery's inception – as well as from Walter and Molly Channing's South Fork "Home Farm." Tracy keeps pushing the envelope stylistically (one Channing cuvee is even dubbed "Envelope") while taking continued inspiration from the wines of Northern Italy, particularly Friuli.

Tel.(631) 537 7224

-David Schildknecht

2008 Channing Daughters Chardonnay
Scuttlehole

RATING: 86 points

Also recommended, but no tasting note given.

PRODUCER: Channing Daughters



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Island, New York,
USA

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VARIETY: Chardonnay

DRINK: -

ESTIMATED COST: \$16

SOURCE: eRobertParker.com,
#188
Apr 2010

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-David Schildknecht

2008 Channing Daughters Sylvanus

RATING: 89 points

PRODUCER: Channing Daughters



FROM: The Hamptons, Long Island, New York, USA

VARIETY: Proprietary Blend

DRINK: -

ESTIMATED COST: \$24

SOURCE: eRobertParker.com, #188 Apr 2010

Channing Daughters' 2008 Sylvanus – from equal parts Muscat Ottonel and Pinot Grigio with around 13% Pinot Bianco, grown in a genuine field blend and vinified half in stainless steel, half in older French and Slovenian barrels – offers lovely varietal synergy and proves an excellent use for the sometimes rustic and overly-assertive Ottonel. (Unfortunately, there is no 2009 due to the estate's drastic crop loss.) Peppermint, white pepper, apricot, and yellow plum aromas lead to a brisk and refreshing palate on which lemon zest and the chew of plum skin add invigoration, and there is a wonderful, mouth-cleansing as well as lasting intensity to the wine's finish. It should prove highly versatile over the next couple of years.

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RATING: 86 points

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Island, New York,
USA

VARIETY: Chardonnay

DRINK: -

ESTIMATED COST: \$16

SOURCE: eRobertParker.com,
#188
Apr 2010

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-David Schildknecht

2008 Channing Daughters Sauvignon Blanc
Mudd Vineyard

RATING: 89 points

PRODUCER: Channing Daughters


FROM: North Fork, Long
Island, New York,
USA

VARIETY: Sauvignon Blanc

DRINK: 2010 - 2013

ESTIMATED COST: \$24

SOURCE: eRobertParker.com,
#188
Apr 2010

The Channing Daughters 2008 Sauvignon Blanc Mudd Vineyard – raised in a mixture of new and old barrels with some tank, and including 5% Chardonnay – smells of caraway, parsnip, lime zest, white pepper, and sage. Faintly oily in texture yet with infectiously juicy brightness, it offers an impressively mouth-coating and invigoratingly pungent finish that reflects its aromatic components. Time in wood is no doubt in part responsible for this wine's textural interest and complexity, but it betrays no flavors of oak per se. It should prove delightful for 2-3 years. There are fewer than 250 cases – a small lot even by this estate's standards; and the 2009 will be every bit as zesty, vivacious, and impressive.

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2008 Channing Daughters Romato

RATING: 88 points

PRODUCER: Channing Daughters



FROM: North Fork, Long
Island, New York,
USA

VARIETY: Pinot Gris

DRINK: 2010 - 2013

ESTIMATED COST: \$20

SOURCE: eRobertParker.com,
#188
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Winemaker Christopher Tracy calls 2008 Romato his introductory-level “orange” – as opposed to white – wine, since it represents Pinot Grigio skin-fermented as if it were intended for red wine, but in small barrels, with results that will not be to everyone’s taste but must be tasted to be understood (or indeed, believed). A fascinating nose of orange zest, pork rinds, and celery seed leads to a palate of doughy consistency and a finish of nutty piquancy, salinity, bittersweet zest, and flor-like pungency. And for all of its sense of substantiality, like nearly all Channing Daughters wines, this weighs in at a bit less than 12% alcohol. Try playing with it at table, and if you weren’t already convinced by it solo, you might just acquire a taste for it! I wouldn’t doubt that this could remain interesting for 2-3 years.

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2008 Channing Daughters Pinot Grigio

RATING: 89 points

PRODUCER: Channing Daughters


FROM: The Hamptons, Long
Island, New York,
USA

VARIETY: Pinot Gris

DRINK: 2010 - 2014

ESTIMATED COST: \$20

SOURCE: eRobertParker.com,
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Don't let its low price or the ubiquity of this grape in the marketplace fool you, the Channing Daughters 2008 Pinot Grigio – a wine that takes its bearings from the likes of Friuli's Stanislao Radikon – is seriously delicious. Peach, nut oils, freshly milled grain, musk, and whiffs of sea breeze and wood smoke in the nose lead to a sappy, subtly oily palate with Meursault-like nut, peach, and grain flavors allied to salt and smoke, and finishing with satisfying cling. As with most wines from this estate, the wood (both barriques and Slovenian hogsheads, augmented by some stainless steel) is both discreetly integrated and employed for good reasons. One can expect to savor this for the next 3-4 years at least.

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2004 Channing Daughters Pazzo

RATING: 91 points

PRODUCER: Channing Daughters



FROM: North Fork, Long
Island, New York,
USA

VARIETY: Merlot

DRINK: -

ESTIMATED COST: \$30

SOURCE: eRobertParker.com,
#188
Apr 2010

As if experiments with white grapes were not enough, the Channing Daughters' 2004 Pazzo is one they tried with their Merlot: fortify it; leave it in five barriques outside for five years until 25% was lost and the taste was dry; then sweeten judiciously back with some 2008 Merlot juice. Got that? Just wait 'til you taste it! A nose of cocoa powder, toasted almonds, and cherry jam reminds one a bit to be sure of Banyuls, Maury or even wooded port. The palate though is unlike anything I have experienced in fortified wine, very richly-textured and deeply complex yet almost light to the touch, and with a vigorous malic kick from the Merlot must that persists into the long, saliva-inducing finish. Who knows how long it will last – probably decades. And, in fact, there were 12 barrels of fortified Merlot from 2004 here: one spoiled and the 6 now remaining will be bottled after another five years!

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2008 Channing Daughters Mosaico

RATING: 89 points

PRODUCER: Channing Daughters



FROM: North Fork, Long
Island, New York,
USA

VARIETY: Proprietary Blend

DRINK: 2010 - 2015

ESTIMATED COST: \$29

SOURCE: eRobertParker.com,
#188
Apr 2010

Based on another Channing Daughter field blend (this one planted with alternating small "panels" of each grape) the 2008 Mosaico employs Pinot Grigio, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Muscat Ottonel, Tocai, and Gewurztraminer, all crushed together save for the Muscat, which was separated to give it some skin contact. Bacon fat, caraway, raw almond, lemon zest, and cardamom are among the elements in a complex nose that adumbrates the flavors on a smoky, oily-textured, corpulent, yet by no means heavy palate. There is a juicy, melon-like matrix of fruit here as well, and a piquant, smoky finish. This should intrigue and inspire at the table for at least the next 4-5 years.

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2007 Channing Daughters Meditazione

RATING: 92 points

PRODUCER: Channing Daughters



FROM: The Hamptons, Long
Island, New York,
USA

VARIETY: Proprietary Blend

DRINK: 2010 - 2015

ESTIMATED COST: \$40

SOURCE: eRobertParker.com,
#188
Apr 2010

2007 Meditazione is Channing Daughters' latest rendition of a wine inspired by Jasko Gravner, and represents a huge advance on the already intriguing 2004 that I tasted four years ago. This unites Tocai and Sauvignon Blanc, with smaller amounts of Pinot Grigio, Pinot Bianco and Muscat Ottonel. (The precise grapes and blends vary each year; this is not a field blend.) A haunting nose of green tea, raw almond, iris, and chamomile leads to a creamy, subtly oily, and deeply complex palate suggesting caramelized summer squash, nut oils, diverse herbs, floral essences. Amazingly rich for a wine of just 11.6% alcohol, it finishes with amazing persistence. What's the catch? Well, there are only 108 cases (but there will be more than 300 of the 2008, to be released this year.) I suspect it will be worth following for at least 4-5 years.

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2007 Channing Daughters Envelope

RATING: 90 points

PRODUCER: Channing Daughters


FROM: North Fork, Long
Island, New York,
USA

VARIETY: Proprietary Blend

DRINK: 2010 - 2015

ESTIMATED COST: \$40

SOURCE: eRobertParker.com,
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A new wood- and skin-fermented “orange wine” from Chardonnay with small measures of Gewurztraminer and Malvasia, Channing Daughters’ 2007 Envelope (as in “pushing the ?”) smells intriguingly of violets, smoky bacon, and toasted nuts. Thereafter comes a mouthful of yellow tomatoes cooked in bacon fat, accompanied by a nutty piquancy and complex, mysterious bitterness that leads to a finish of implacable grip and chew. The first two vintages of this wine were pure Chardonnay, but the blend is far more interesting, and – while some will be put-off by it – likely to prove fascinating at table for at least the next 4-5 years.

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