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Risk-taking artistry

Although Channing Daughters' address is Bridgehampton, a chic town on the gilded South Fork of Long Island, part of its heart lies in cool-climate Friuli-Venezia Giulia in northeastern Italy. For me, this boutique winery's whites are the most provocative on the East End, as Long Island's maritime wine region is called. Between public demand and its wine club subscribers, Channing Daughters' whites deservedly sell out quickly.

The name of one white blend signals the estate's preoccupation with experimentation: Envelope. "We will continue to push the envelope of what is possible in our vineyards, our cellar and our region," the winery explains on its Web site.

In 2004, while attending Windows on Long Island Wine, an annual grand tasting that the Long Island Wine Council once held in Manhattan, I almost bypassed Channing Daughters' table: From the estate's establishment in 1997, its wines had been mostly forgettable.

But I did stop and sampled the 2003 Mudd Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc and the 2003 Sylvanus, an amalgam of muscat, pinot grigio and pinot bianco. Startled by their unexpected vividness, I glanced up and, for the first time, encountered James Christopher Tracy, the then-new winemaker.

I saw an amiable boyish face, playful, inquisitive eyes and a ponytail. "Change," I thought to myself, "has come." Those were the days when Tracy was just Tracy. Today he is Tracy, D.W.S., C.W.E. (a diploma from the Wine and Spirits Education Trust and a Certified Wine Educator, respectively) and a Master of Wine candidate.

These accomplishments suggest Tracy's gusto for the total wine experience — a *joie de vivre* you can easily detect while exploring his flavor-packed whites. Focusing on them for some four years, I have been able to trace the maturation of his risk-taking artistry and technical skills in the cellar.

Perhaps we have California to thank. Tracy was reared in the San Francisco Bay area. His folks owned a vineyard in Napa Valley, just below the legendary Stony Hill, in St. Helena.

Tracy brings a kitchen- and restaurant-service sensibility to his work, a major advantage in an agricultural region with 53 producers that thrives on surf-and-turf cuisine. He earned a diploma from the French Culinary Institute, in New York City, and a certificate from the Sommelier Society of America.

All this partly explains why Tracy has quickly earned his way into the first rank of local winemakers (plus a partnership in the business). But he could not have done so without the viticultural smarts of his predecessor, Larry Perrine, the chief executive officer and a partner, who oversees the vineyard and grape purchases. (Tracy's wife, Allison Dubin, is general manager and also a partner.)

The entire enterprise, four miles from the Atlantic, is nurtured by the environmentally conscious senior partner, Walter Channing, a venture capitalist and an accomplished woodcarver. His striking creations, focusing expressively on tree trunk and root forms, dot the landscape of his 125-acre property — 28 in grapes.

In short, artistry dominates the atmosphere.

Imagine the kaleidoscopic variations of blends from a roll call of the grapes: chardonnay, gewürztraminer, malvasia bianca, muscat ottonel, pinot bianco,

pinot grigio, sémillon, tocai Friulano and viognier. Not your garden-variety Long Island vineyard. These grapes come into play in blends carrying proprietary names: Cuvée Tropical, Envelope, Meditazione, Mosaico, Sylvanus and Vino Bianco.

"We did plant a few (literally) vines of albariño this year to see how they do. If we come across ribolla gialla, which we have been working on sourcing, we certainly will plant that," Tracy says. Ribolla gialla is a Friulian grape.

As a white-wine maven, I am primarily interested in this spectrum. But the record should show that Channing grapes, grown at home and bought from others after exercising rigorous supervision, also include blaufrankisch (lemlberger), cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, domfelder, lagrein, merlot, petit verdot, pinot noir, refosco, syrah and teroldego.

In 2007, Tracy made just over 11,000 cases, and plans to replicate that amount this year. "Our cap right now — depending on vintage — is somewhere between 10,000 and 12,000 cases," he says. "This is what we can do in our current and planned space, and I can still have my nose in everything." Forty to 50 percent of the fruit is purchased.

Drawn to Friuli — "food and wine there together are an inspiration" and "so many varieties and styles of wine are made" — Tracy visited producers there in 2004 and 2006 to "glean any knowledge and inspiration that would help us grow, literally and figuratively."

Attracted by Friuli's *vino de meditazione* (meditation wine), Tracy blended seven white grapes to create his 2006 dry, golden-hued Meditazione, an enigmatic, tangy wine that captivated the palate and intellect. While I have become cranky about Superman-style tasting notes ("up, up and away") that are becoming increasingly outlandish — possibly a byproduct of amateurish wine blog exhibitionism — I would go with Tracy's description of his 2006: a scent and taste of dried apricot, citrus oil, crushed rock, white flowers, light caramel and brown spice, with notes of tea and cider.

Eccentric or not, such first-rate Manhattan restaurants as *Bouley*, *Danube* and *Hearth* have placed Meditazione on their lists.

Using grapes bought from Mudd Vineyard, on the North Fork, which, planted in the 1970s, is one of the region's oldest commercial sources, Tracy makes an enticing Sauvignon Blanc that is lightly herbaceous and refreshes with a kiwi-like bite. The 2007 version consists of 97 percent sauvignon and 3 percent chardonnay musqué grapes. (Musqué is a strain that yields a seductive muscat-like scent.)

Conceivably, Channing's 2006 Mosaico is one of the most sophisticated dry wines ever created on Long Island and one of New York State's great 2006 wines. This thrilling, technically daring blend consists of pinot grigio (34 percent), chardonnay (33 percent), sauvignon blanc (14), tocai Friulano (7), gewürztraminer (6) and muscat ottonel (6). It is a ritzy fruit salad in a bottle.

Talk about experimentation: Most wineries content themselves with one rosé, but Channing Daughters offers three. The Tre Rosati package consists of Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot versions, each vinified in steel to preserve fruitiness and pizzazz. The shades of pink have their own charm. I placed the trio on my white dining room's white table and watched the morning sun turn them neon.

But, hey, Tracy's experimentation has limits. At 37, he still wears a ponytail. "I have no intentions of cutting it off," he says. ☛

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