

From Potatoes To Terrific Wines

Written by Terry Connor
Monday, 29 May 2017 01:27

I thought that I had a good plan: to visit some wineries, meet some of the folks, taste the wine, make some notes and move on. The plan would have worked if I had worn blinders, been rude, not listened to the very polite and informative winery personnel, tasted the wine and gone on my way. I realized early on that I had better alter my thinking and do it the Long Island way. I must say that it was a very good decision on my part, as each winery had a unique story to tell.

Allow me to go back to the spring of 1984 when Lindsey Gruson published an article in the *New York Times*

that clearly described the end of growing potatoes on the eastern end of Long Island. The potato farmers had been overwhelmed with numerous problems that included rising production costs, high interest rates, voracious pests resistant to insecticide, and incessant pressure from land developers. (These remarks are limited to the eastern end of Long Island, which is now referred to as the North and South Forks.) The problems caused the farmers to go out of business. It was apparent that their only means of raising some cash was by way of auctioning off their homes and farming equipment. The end result of this tragedy was thousands of acres of land lay barren where potatoes used to grow. Fortunately it was determined that the barren soil was a good host for planting grapes.

Approximately 10 years before the demise of the potato farms, Alex and Louisa Hargrave of Hargrave Vineyards in Cutchogue, Long Island planted the first commercial vineyard. Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc were the first varietals and the first bottling was in 1975. The Winery changed hands in 1999 and is now known as Castello di Borghese Winery and Vineyard. What the Hargraves started in 1973 has grown to nearly 70 wineries. Each winery has its own story to tell and they do it very well. From what I observed the winery personnel are very much aware that it is not a nine-to-five job that they are dealing with. They know that they must go that extra mile to please at least three customer types: distributors, restaurants and walk-in traffic at the winery tasting room. This requires quality time and quality effort. The implication is clear. If they do a great job today, they could become the Napa of tomorrow. A worthy goal on which to set their sights.

Let's taste some wine.

My first stop, was Bedell Cellars. A genuine treat. The tasting room was originally a potato barn. The tasting was hosted by Jack Hurley, a very knowledgeable gentleman. I started my tasting with a Rose and a dry sparkling wine blanc de blanc 100% Chardonnay, The fruit for this sparkler is estate grown. After harvest, it is moved to another location where it is properly

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converted into sparkling wine using the Methode Champenoise process. All of the other wines Bedell makes are estate bottled. The last two wines that I tasted were a Malbec, 100% Malbec fruit, and a Syrah blend of 90% Syrah and 10% Viognier. I normally give Malbecs a C-minus. I will give this Malbec an A-plus anytime. The Syrah did the same for me. Try the Malbec with red meat. The Syrah will pair well with red meat, a spicy pasta and a roast pork. Uh Oh. Almost forgot! The Cabernet Franc is sensational.

My second stop was Sparkling Pointe. This is truly a unique Winery. Their entire product portfolio is Sparkling Wines and they are produced in the Methode Champenoise process at the new winery located in Southold on Long Island. I tasted a range of sparkling wines that went from very dry to sweet. Their biggest seller is the Brut Blend of 60% Chardonnay and 40% Pinot Noir. Here in the Lowcountry we would enjoy this wine with Oysters, or just as an aperitif. Toward the sweet end of the spectrum I enjoyed a Cuvee Carnaval Blanc. This is an aromatic wine with notes of pear and peach. The best food pairing is after dinner with fresh berries or a decadent slice of cheesecake.

Third stop was Paumanok Vineyards. I went to this Vineyard because it was pointed out to me as one that has been important to the New York City restaurants since the late 1980s. The winery was started in 1983 by the Massoud Family making it one of the oldest wineries on the North Fork. Although the Vineyard produces several varietals, the star of the lineup is their Chenin Blanc. Paumanok is the only producer of Chenin Blanc in New York. This wine has been accepted so well because it consistently comes to the marketplace fresh and crisp and it carries pleasant aromas of citrus . . . normally a sellout every year.

WINESPEAK. I could go on all day talking about the wineries of Long Island and I would thoroughly enjoy doing so. However the stories about the wineries have all been written and they have assumed their place in the History Books of Long Island. That being said I look into my crystal ball and I see that this year will bring forth a new crop of grapes and every year thereafter. With each new year there will be new challenges in Viticulture and Enology. There will be demands for passionate commitments to Sustainability. These challenges can only be met by the dedicated people that show up every day. I visited six or seven wineries last week and from what I witnessed, the dedicated people are in place, ready, willing and able. Long Island, I see a bright future.

Cheers

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