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Accolades Roll In for L.I. Wines



Michael Shavel for The New York Times

Kip Bedell, owner and winemaker of Bedell Cellars in his vineyard in Cutchogue.

By HOWARD G. GOLDBERG

LONG ISLAND wineries, on something of a roll, aspire not merely to regional but also to full-scale national and international recognition.

In recent years, they have deservedly received the beginnings of flattering notice — of awareness that East End wines can hold their own in the survival-of-the-fittest commercial wine world. But notice is not the same thing as recognition.

The distinction is easy to blur. Both forms of awareness are registered by sales in the wineries and in stores and restaurants, by volumes of visitors, by contest outcomes (though competitions have so proliferated that gold and silver medals resemble the Weimar Republic's hyperinflated currency), by citations and ratings in the wine media.

The distinction is easy to grasp: For most buyers, both the character and quality of Long Island wines need to be investigated. By contrast, those features of Establishment wines — typified by Burgundy's whites and Bordeaux reds — are simply taken for granted.

To be more specific, it is normal to measure cabernet francs from, say, Pindar or Hargrave against their counterparts from the Loire, a Lenz gewürztraminer against its Alsace cousin, a Paumanok late-harvest riesling against its German counterpart. But not vice versa.

Whether such comparisons are valid is a different issue. Producers can be ambivalent. On one hand, they are flattered that analogies are drawn between their chardonnays and California's; on the other, they say that comparisons are invalid and unfair to Long Island because their white wines are different — leaner, zippier, more vividly fruity.

One reason for all the attention that the North Fork gets is that luckily it lies close to America's national media center. New York-area newspapers, magazines, specialized wine journals, television and radio stations bombard wine lovers with more wine information than anyone can reasonably be expected to ingest in a busy life.

Nonetheless, outside Long Island, sales growth is fairly slow. East End reds and whites are largely a side-show, in much the way the wines of such significant Eastern competitors as the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York and of Virginia are appreciated mainly at home.

Yes, of course, Suffolk County wines can be found (spottily) in some leading stores and on restaurant

A Guide to the Top Wines of Suffolk

Here are wines that the best Suffolk County wineries repeatedly do best. (Look for both the regular reserve bottlings, and if you are buying at the winery tasting bars, ask for a sample first.)

Bedell: chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, merlot.

Lenz: chardonnay, gewürztraminer, pinot blanc, Cuvée (a sparkling wine), cabernet sauvignon, merlot.

Hargrave: blanc fumé, chardonnay, Chardonette (a fairly simple chardonnay), pinot blanc, cabernet franc, merlot.

Pellegrini: chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, Encore (a red blend), Finale (a dessert wine).

Paumanok: chardonnay, riesling (late-harvest), Assemblage (a red blend), cabernet sauvignon, merlot.

Palmer: chardonnay, gewürztraminer, riesling, cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon.

Pindar: chardonnay (the Sunflower label and the reserve), Mythology (a Bordeaux-style red blend), Premier Cuvée (a sparkling wine).

Bidwell: chardonnay, cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, merlot.

Corey Creek: merlot, chardonnay.

Gristina: chardonnay, merlot (Andy's Field label).

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wine cards in Manhattan. But generally they seem incidental to rivals from the main show — Europe, California, Oregon, Australia. And, by many accounts, they are so-called hard sells: They must be pushed by behind-the-counter sales personnel, waiters and sommeliers.

Customers have to be persuaded that something special — or, minimally, interesting and promising — awaits their dollars.

That is where recognition comes in — in other words, confidence based on accumulated experience that year in, year out a producer's wines, the simplest through most complex, will be consistently appealing and good values. It is the kind of certainty that obviously accompanies names like Mondavi and Fetzer and, yes, Gallo.

After nearly two years of week in and week out tasting of Long Island's wines, my overall feeling is that the most ambitious among them range from good to excellent but that they are almost never brilliant; that is the next stage of technical and esthetic development, one hopes.

Of the East End's 16 established producers, only a handful have earned real brand recognition by dint of longevity and years of reasonably dependable performance.

In my judgment, the central core of achievers consists of Bedell, Lenz and Hargrave, in that order. Without hesitation, I would serve their best wines to the most demanding wine lovers I know. The league leader is Bedell's merlots, both regular and reserve, which set the pace for the East End's signature grape and

match the top versions from anywhere.

The second rank consists of Pellegrini and Paumanok, again in that order. I exclude from the first rank Pellegrini, which is perhaps on its way to becoming the region's best winery, only because it is merely four years old.

The third rank is occupied by Palmer, Pindar, Bidwell, Corey Creek (it is only four old and has its wines made by Pellegrini and Palmer) and, finally, Gristina.

This is not to say that every wine or every vintage from the leading estates has been interesting. Like blue-chip stocks on the Big Board and the specials at multi-star restaurants and personal moods, even the best wineries have ups and downs: This year's cabernets are champions, next year's are less inspiring.

The picture is complicated, of course, by vintage variations and the mercurial behavior of wine itself — and by the purchaser's subjective judgments. Unless you buy cases of good wine and uncork the bottles intermittently, it is hard to rate a wine, much less a winery, for consistency.

Since most East End wineries have been established since the 1980's, it is unclear how well even their most seemingly durable wines can age. Treat all claims of great longevity skeptically, drink the whites young and the sturdy reds within three years of the vintage, look primarily for 1993's, 1994's and 1995's and try the 1996 whites selectively.