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2019 *LONG ISLAND* FOOD LOVERS GUIDE

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Newsday

Fieldwork by Alice Wise, viticulture specialist at Cornell's Long Island Horticultural Research and Extension Center in Calverton, leads to plantings of new varieties such as NY81.

Spinning the bottle

For Long Island winemakers, erratic weather and rising temperatures could be gamechangers. New grapes and new thinking are the difference between a glass that is half empty and one half full.

By Corin Hirsch | Photographs by Alejandra Villa Loarca

It was an overcast, muggy August morning when Alice Wise barreled a golf cart down a dirt road behind her Calverton office. I gripped a low bar next to the driver's seat as we sailed over a bump toward a few dozen rows of grapevines. As we hopped out, Wise, a spry figure in loose khakis and a t-shirt, talked fluidly about the economics of wine.

"It's expensive to plant grapes, easily $20,000 to plant grapes, and that's not even the cost of the land and the equipment," she said as we ambled into a row. "That's just preparing the site and getting the vines in the ground."

Wise is not in the tenuous business of wine, though, even if grapevines have steered her entire working life. For the past 33 years, ever since graduating from Cornell with a master's in viticulture, she's played a crucial but more behind-the-scenes role on the North Fork. As a researcher, she investigates the perils that grapevines and their fruit face from viruses, fungi and insects, as well as screens new varieties. That work takes place here, in a 1.5-acre research vineyard.

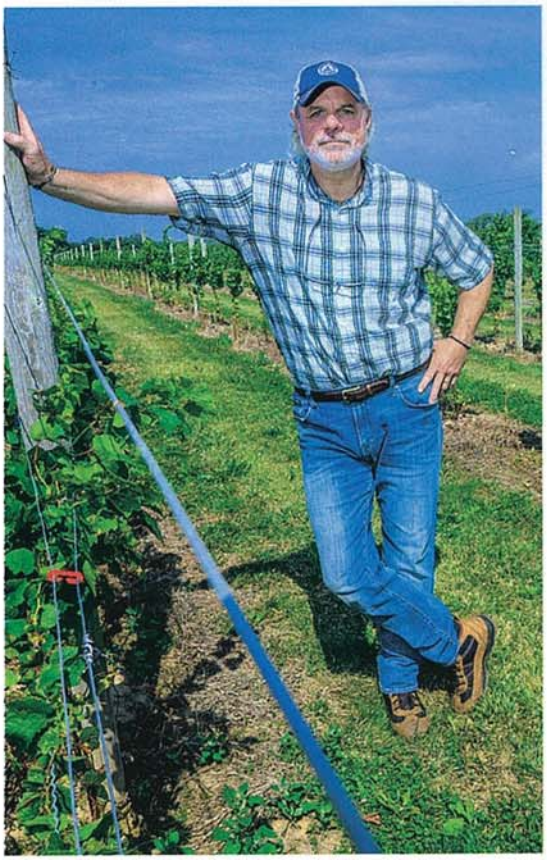
Wise barely needed to look at the numbered posts that delineate each panel of vines as she pointed left and right to identify them. "This is petite manseng," she said of one vine. Clusters of golden fruit droop behind taut netting intended to keep out hungry starlings and robins. "It takes a long time to ripen, but I think it's a really interesting variety. It makes dessert wine."

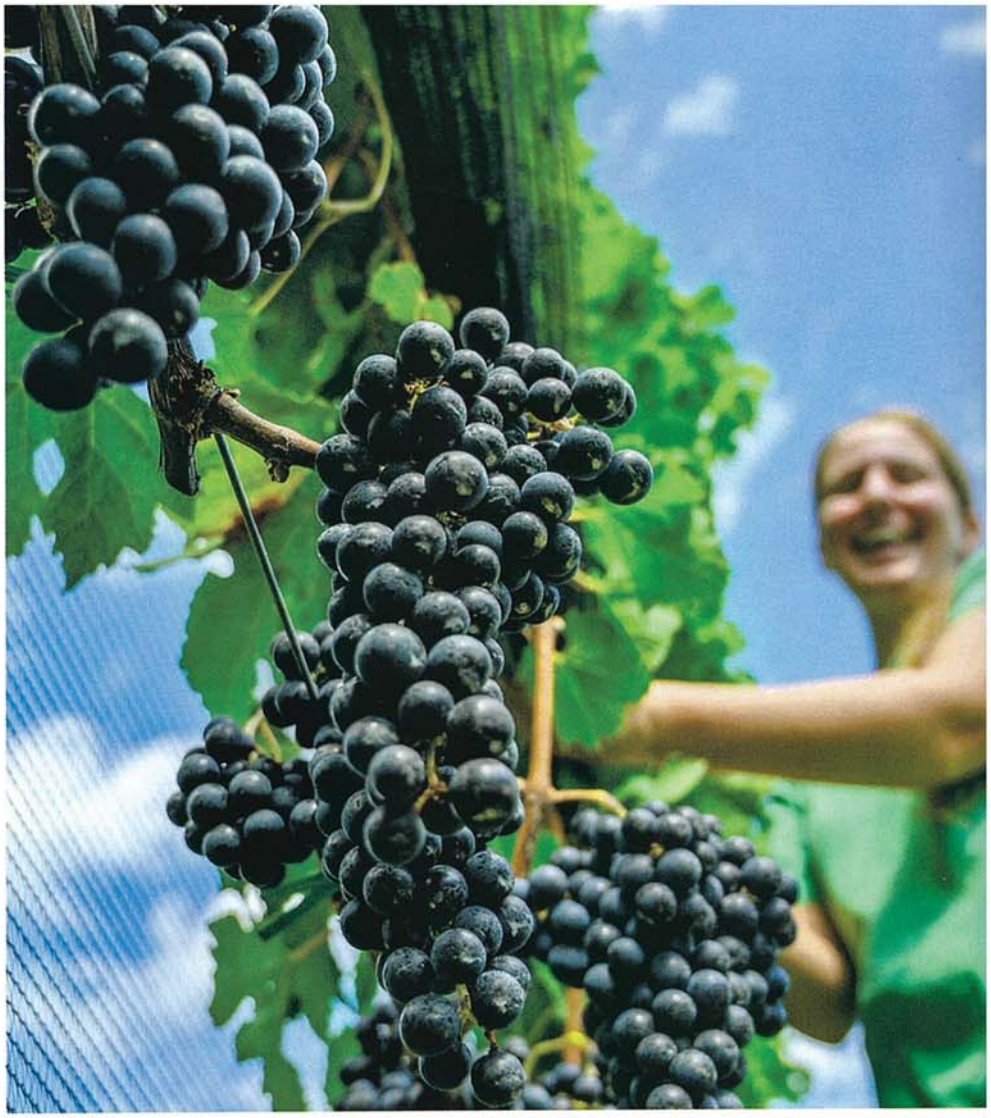
Wise does not summarily decide what gets planted here, but listens to what winemakers and others in the industry tell her. "There's been a lot of interest in food-friendly, aromatic whites," she said, such as albariño. "Chardonnay, merlot, cab is what everyone started out with, but there has certainly been a diversification since then."

Verdejo, moscato giallo, malvasia, refosco, saperavi—a red grape from Georgia (the country) also grown in the Finger Lakes region—arneis, rkatsiteli. The names are probably unfamiliar to the average East End daytripper, but Wise studies them with the long view in mind.

Which varieties from Spain or Italy might thrive in the North Fork's terroir? Which might succumb to disease? Which ripen early, and which ripen late? These are among the considerations that come into play in a wine industry at a tricky but promising crossroads of soaring operating costs, shifting consumer interests and a changing climate and its attendant hazards, the things Wise has spent her career studying. Her work dovetails with and supports Long Island Sustainable Winegrowing, a group devoted to reducing the use of chemicals and fertilizers, among other things; about half of the 50 or so wineries on the North Fork belong to the organization. "There's no other program like this on the East Coast," Wise said.

As we clambered back into the golf cart, Wise mentioned the tropical storm thousands of miles to the south, the one that would eventually become Hurricane Dorian. I was unaware and told her so. "I constantly check the Weather Channel. We're always nervous this time of year," she said. »





Winemaker Rich Olsen-Harbich (left) at Bedell Cellars in Cutchogue. Amanda Gardner (right), grape program assistant, checking the vines at Cornell's viticulture research farm. **Opposite:** *Fall is harvest time at Bedell and other vineyards.*

The weather was also very much on the mind of Rich Olsen-Harbich, winemaker at Bedell Cellars, about a half hour down the road in Cutchogue. "We'll get to 91 on Sunday, 84 tomorrow, 84 Saturday. I know New York City is going to be close to 100 degrees on Saturday," he said, looking at his phone. "It can be anywhere from 5 to 10 degrees cooler here."

We were sunk into armchairs in Bedell's loft in Cutchogue, sipping Olsen-Harbich's sparkling blanc des blancs at 11:30 in the morning. The loft, the bubbly, the Barbara Kruger and Chuck Close prints on the wall—it's a much-removed scene from 1981, when Olsen-Harbich was a young Cornell plant science graduate who arrived on the East End when the North Fork was mostly given over to potato and dairy farms. Back then, the only vines had been planted mostly by Alex and Louisa Hargrave, in the 1970s, at their Cutchogue vineyard (now Castello di Borghese).

Some months before, Olsen-Harbich was among the grape growers and winemakers gathered at Cornell Cooperative Extension for a presentation by NASA climate scientist Benjamin Cook, who scrolled through slides showing average harvest dates from 1600 to 2018. The data showed increasingly hotter, wetter conditions in the Northeast—95-degree-plus days projected to triple between now and 2100, downpours to spike by 71 percent, and other unsettling data.

"In the warmest places, where we're currently growing some of the prestige varieties that generate $100 to $200 a bottle—places like Napa and Sonoma—in 50 years we could see significant changes in the characters of the wines," said Cook. One of his maps showed that traditional wine-producing regions such as Napa and much of Italy would be "no longer suitable," because of heat, where cooler regions, such as Long Island, Oregon and southern England, would slide into the gap. "Gallo [the giant California producer] is buying up land in Tasmania," he added.

"The wine industry is the canary in the coal mine, where you can find data that goes back 500 years that says, 'things are not what they used to be,'" Olsen-Harbich said later. He communicates often with winemakers from around the world, some of whom come to visit the North Fork after doing business in New York City.

"Everyone has said they're picking grapes a month earlier than their father, their grandfather used to, or they're dealing with conditions they never had to deal with, like hailstorms," Olsen-Harbich said.

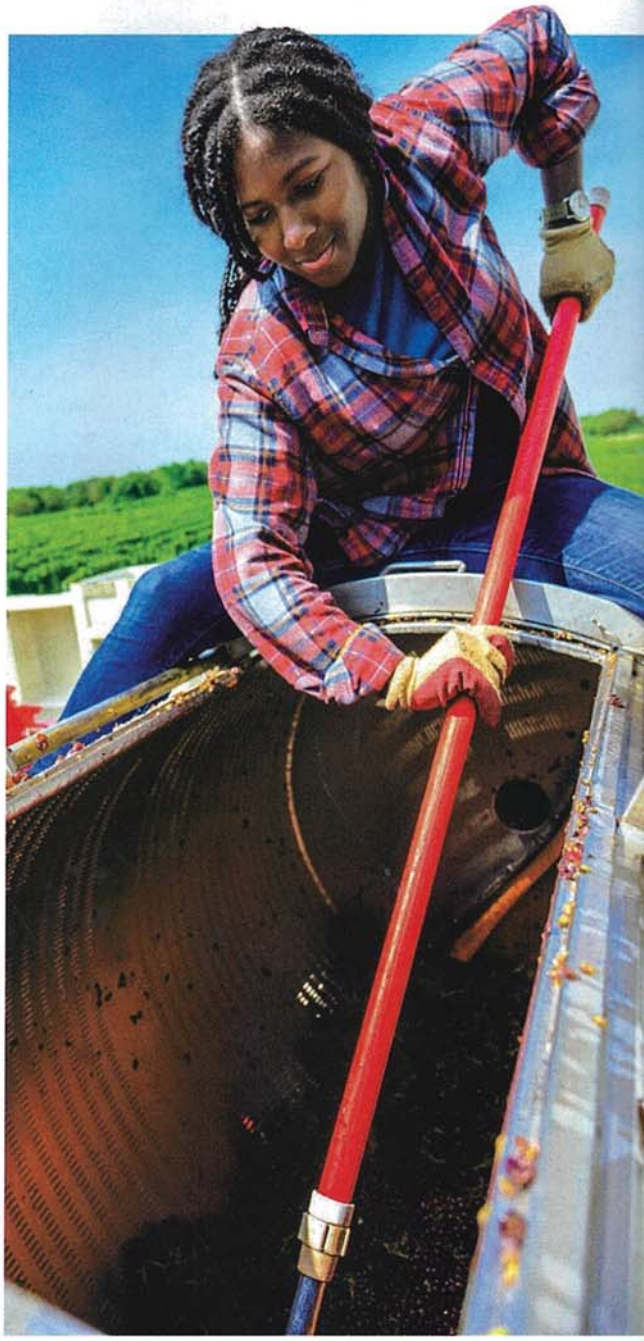
After studying viticulture at Cornell and returning to his native Long Island, Olsen-Harbich got his start in the industry working with David Mudd of Mudd's Vineyard, "basically the second person to put vines in the ground," he said. "[Mudd and his son, Steve] planted 1,000 to 1,500 acres of wines, from Riverhead to Greenport. Chardonnay, merlot, cabernet, sauvignon, gewürztraminer, everything. It was a big boom in planting."

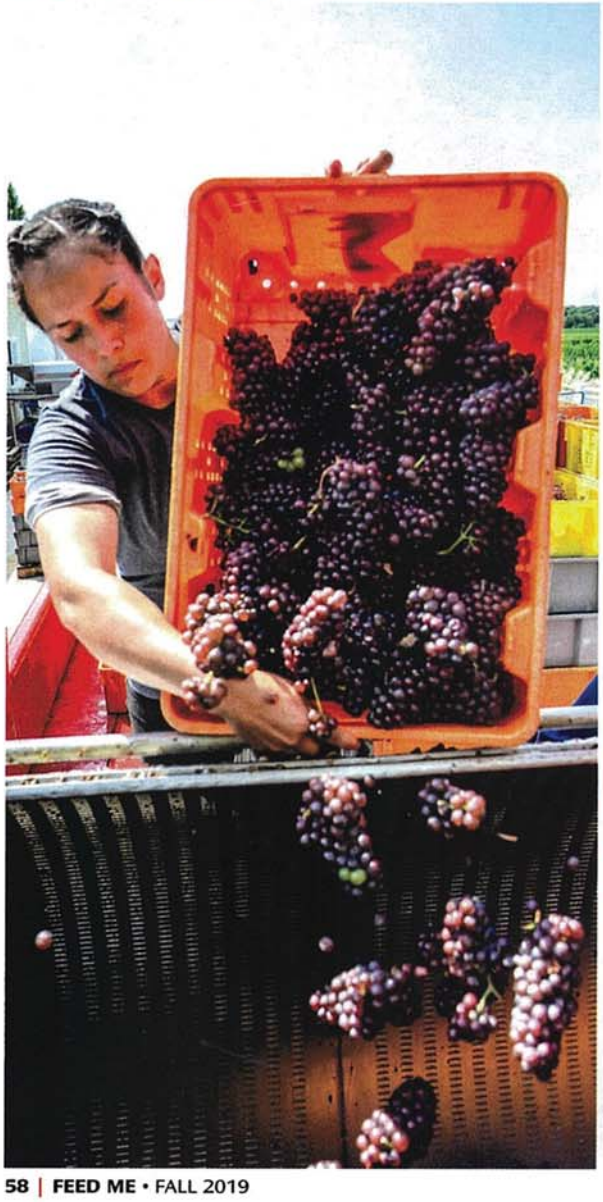
By the time the North Fork wine industry kicked into gear in the late 1970s and early '80s, New York wine was synonymous with Finger Lakes and Hudson Valley wine, where native vines such as *V. labrusca* (aka "foxy" grapes like Concord) predominated.

"Riesling was just starting to become commercially successful," Olsen-Harbich said. "There weren't as many growers willing to take a chance on European grapes up there, like merlot and cabernet sauvignon. This region really opened the door to red European grapes that were never grown upstate before."

In East End viticulture, an early and enduring darling was merlot, a vigorous vine whose fruit ripens early—a boon in a cool maritime climate—and makes for approachable wines with ample plum and dark cherry notes that work their magic on every type of palate.

"It was relatively easy to grow, and was popular in the marketplace," said Larry Perrine, another Cornell alum and today, partner and CEO of Channing Daughters Winery in Bridgehampton. Merlot's partner in arms on the North Fork, chardonnay—another early ripener—was versatile enough to make the crisp blanc des blancs we sipped at Bedell, or the oak-bomb chards that many drinkers sought then and now. »





Pressing grapes sounds glamorous but, in reality, it is hard physical work. The winemaking team at Bedell Cellars includes (below, from left to right) cellar assistant Lila Miller, winemaker Rich Olsen-Harbich, assistant vineyard manager Deb Stroup, cellar assistant Maria Huertas, assistant winemaker Marin Brennan and vineyard manager Donna Rudolph. Integral to the operation are two four-footed team members, Ted (standing) and River (sitting).

Starting in 1980, Kip and Susan Bedell planted mostly merlot on their gently rolling 50-acre Cutchogue farm. Bedell's low-interventionist approach would, over time, establish the winery as a leader in sustainable winemaking, and Bedell started earning attention—and higher ratings—in the mid '90s. By 2000, when Michael Lynne, then owner of New Line Cinema, purchased Bedell for $5 million, Long Island wine was gaining respect and vineyards changed hands in a string of multimillion-dollar deals. Through it all, merlot, chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc reigned, and the wines grew more polished.

Olsen-Harbich joined Bedell in 2010 and, since then, much has changed in the Bedell vineyard. As we stood in the drizzle, he pointed out newcomers such as malbec, first grown in the Cornell vineyard before it started being planted commercially. "We make it here in a way other than people are used to getting from Argentina, which is dark and inky," he said. "Here, it doesn't do that—it's more feminine, more elegant, a little more delicate."

A few rows down was viognier ("On the West Coast, it can be unctuous and heavy. Here, it's brighter and refreshing"), albariño ("a terrific fit for us") and infant sprigs of auxerrois blanc, a French white grape that also came out of Cornell. "[Alice Wise] has been talking about that one for a while as being a winner in her vineyard," he said.

Over at Channing Daughters, the spectrum of grapes grown there has also exploded on Perrine's watch: Italian grapes such as vermentino and Austrian grapes like blaufränkisch comprise a rollicking portfolio that loops through orange wines, pétillant naturels, at least five rosés a year and imaginative, wild yeast–fermented blends made by winemaker Christopher Tracy.

While the wines have gained a cult following, Perrine sees a broader purpose etched into their skins. "Out of the 2,000 or so identified grape varieties, maybe only 20 account for most of the acreage planted in the world. That's going to have to change as time goes by, for both a changing climate and people's changing expectations," he said. "More and more, the industry is accepting and adopting new varieties that are disease resistant, so we can reduce the amount of fungicides we need to use. The obsession with these particular grape varieties will eventually have to give way as the climate changes."

Perrine noted that drinkers, too, seem more and more interested in novelty. Recently, Channing pulled some 30-year-old chardonnay vines and replaced them with muscat ottonel. "It's an early-ripening variety, and it has multiple uses from pét nats to dessert wines to dry table wines. We're also in the entertainment business, in a way. It's not music—it's the intellectual and hedonistic entertainment business."

And that ethos extends westward, into Nassau County.

In Roslyn, a 90-minute drive from the North Fork, a side street baked in the heat as Erik Longabardi rolled up the door to an old garage, one in front of his 18th-century house here. We walked into its exhale of must, but only a few steps, as most of the space was filled with barrels, a colonial-era American flag on the wall above them.

Longabardi is a schoolteacher by day and makes cider and wine during every other waking moment. Wielding a slender glass pipette, he pulled the plug from the top of a barrels and drew out purple juice, dribbling it into glasses. This was aging teroldego, a northern Italian grape grown on the North Fork that he picked last October, pressed with stems and skins attached and let ferment as whole clusters, an ancient winemaking practice which is back in vogue. It was inky and peppery but still somehow nimble, truly exceptional, and I told him so. "It was made in a crude fashion, but it works," he shrugged.

"Over at Channing Daughters, the spectrum of grapes has also exploded.... While the wines have gained a cult following, Perrine sees a broader purpose etched into their skins."

Longabardi, 39, began making wine at home in his 20s, and continued after a move to Roslyn from Brooklyn. Along the way, he segued into cidermaking, using apples gathered from various homesteads across Long Island—a simultaneous act, he said, of land preservation and craft, and one he undertakes with partner Benford Lepley. The ciders, under the label Floral Terranes, have gained devotees in a tight-knit world of beverage aficionados, and in turn have influenced the idiosyncratic way Longabardi and Lepley also make wine. "We started with cider, so I feel we're totally not tied to any convention of winemaking," said Lepley.

In 2018, they released their first wines, microbatches of a goldmuskateller—aka moscato giallo—and a red blend with the teroldego. Both sold out fast. This cycle, they experienced firsthand the perils of increased moisture after a batch of sauvignon blanc they picked on the East End last fall was compromised by rot. "We had 18 or 19 bags of grapes, and we had to toss a lot of it," said Longabardi. In the end, they kept only enough to make one barrel of wine. "It became my favorite wine that I made in 2018." »