

# HOUSE & Garden

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## Uncorked | North Fork Surprise

### LONG ISLAND WINE MAKING HAS DEFINITELY ARRIVED WITH SOME EXCELLENT WHITES AND A FEW VERY GOOD REDS BY JAY MCINERNEY

FOR THE PAST 20 YEARS, I've been visiting the East End of Long Island—one of the most beautiful, and expensive, landscapes in North America—but I have so far refrained from writing about the local wine. Despite periodic announcements of breakthroughs and blind-tasting triumphs, I wasn't convinced that Long Island wines were ready for prime time, or for my table. It hardly seemed like a positive indicator for the region when the vines at well-regarded Schneider Vineyards were ripped up to make way for a horse farm. But after spending the summer tasting and visiting wineries, I'm newly optimistic about what's happening in my own backyard.

Long Island winemakers haven't had it easy. Developers covet their land; the local wildlife covets their fruit. As I write this, I'm looking out the window at seven deer munching the lawn. Deer love grape vines. Eastern Long Island is also on the flight path of numerous migratory birds, most of which love grapes. Fencing and netting are an expensive necessity here, but there's no defense against Hollywood. The fact that merlot is the grape on which most Long Island vintners have been betting the farm seemed at first unfortunate in the wake of the 2004 film *Sideways*, in which that grape was cast as a cheesy villain. And yet the reds that really got me excited this past summer were, in fact, merlots: the 2001 Lenz Old Vines Merlot and the 2001 and 2002 vintages of the Grapes of Roth, made by Long Island veteran Roman Roth. These wines represent a happy medium between fruity California and earthy Bordeaux. Cabernet franc also has its proponents here, but the real news, for me, is the quality and freshness of the white wines and the rosés.

The East End of Long Island looks a bit like a lobster claw aimed at France. Along with fishing, potato farming was the backbone of the local economy on both the upper and lower parts of the claw. In 1973, Louisa and Alex Hargrave planted the first vinifera vines on the North Fork, where the two were soon joined by Kip Bedell and several other incurable optimists. Five years later, Hamburg-born playboy-entrepreneur Christian Wölffer bought a potato farm on the South Fork, which he turned into Sagpond Vineyards.

Geologically and meteorologically, the North Fork and the South Fork are fairly similar, with their sandy soils and their marine-influenced weather. Culturally, they are as dissimilar as Fitzgerald's East Egg and West Egg. The South Fork encompasses the Hamptons, the summer playground of Manhattan's plutocracy. The North Fork, home to some 30 wineries, has a certain Mayberry RFD ambience, an agricultural vibe that reminds some

transplanted Californians of Napa Valley b.m. (before Mondavi). John Irving Levenberg, the diminutive winemaker at Bedell Cellars, is one of those transplants. "We have a chance to do something unique in the wine world," he says. "That's why I came here." When he was working for Paul Hobbs in Sonoma, Levenberg produced super-ripe alcoholic chardonnays that weighed in at more than 15 percent alcohol. Long Island, with its cooler climate, produces wines with higher natural acidity and lower alcohol, and Levenberg is not the first to suggest—and hope—that the wine world is moving in that direction.

Flying in the face of the local merlot mania, Channing Daughters Winery, in Bridgehampton, specializes in white varietals and white blends, which are garnering good press and finding space on Manhattan wine lists. "We believe Long Island is a white wine region," says winemaker Christopher Tracy, another California transplant. "We also believe in blending, because we think we can make more complex wines." The blends are partly inspired by the whites of Italy's Friuli region, the climate of which Tracy finds similar to the East End's. My favorite is the Mosaico, an exotically aromatic, viscous, and complex blend of pinot grigio, chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, Tocai Friulano, gewürztraminer, and muscat. Tracy also bottles single-varietal examples of Tocai Friulano and pinot grigio, both of which may be the best new-world examples I've encountered, and they're both great with the local littleneck clams. He also produces three excellent rosés, which cost about a third of the Domaines Ott rosé, the fashionable quaff here in the Hamptons.

If Channing Daughters' Mudd Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc is any indication, that varietal would seem to have great potential on the East End. In fact, the most impressive white wine I've tasted in months is Paumanok Vineyard's botrytised, late-harvest 2005 sauvignon blanc, an exquisite nectar that resembles a German eiswein.

Like several East End wineries, Channing Daughters also produces chardonnays in two styles, one lean and racy (Scuttlehole) and the other (L'Enfant Sauvage) fat and buttery—what I call lobster chardonnay. Despite the abundance of lobsters out here, I think the unoaked style is best suited to the climate. Long Island will never be able to compete with Napa and Sonoma in the Pamela Anderson School of Chardonnay. But as Long Island winemakers hone their craft, they are offering an increasingly attractive and sophisticated set of alternatives to the muscle-bound cabs and buxom chards of the West.

