

# CULT OF TASTE

## ISLAND TERROIR

### *Understanding Brooklyn's Closest Wine Region*

BY LISA GRANIK



“Shame on me” was Joe Pipia’s frank self-assessment, admitting he knew nothing about Long Island wines until very recently. Pipia, whose mother purchased what is now Vineyard 48 on the North Fork of Long Island, grew up in the city and summered in the Hamptons.

But until a few years ago, he had never even tried a wine from Long Island. “I didn’t know they could be any good,” he confessed.

Pipia’s recent discovery of Long Island wines is not unusual. Though the region is 70 miles east of the borough, Brooklynites are only beginning to discover the wine country in our backyard.

As a wine region, Long Island is young, without the generations of experience and tradition that distinguish Australia’s Barossa or France’s Bordeaux. In fact, although wild grapes have long grown throughout the eastern United States, it was only in 1973 that Alex and Louisa Hargrave planted Long Island’s first grapes of European origin, for making wine. Although 30 years is a blink of an eye in wine-growing terms, today the East End is home to over 35 wineries, and its reach is spreading beyond the Island. Park Slope’s Bruce Schneider, who owns Schneider Vineyards in Riverhead, proudly points to top restaurants in the tri-state area, Chicago, and San Francisco pouring his wines.

In a world full of wine, what distinguishes those from Long Island? Are they worth seeking out, whether at the corner wine store or on a weekend adventure in our very own wine country?

First, a bit of context. In wine, as in other art forms, less is often more: it can be easy to make a big, fat, powerful wine, but it takes skill to produce a wine of finesse, elegance and delicacy. This might be Long Island’s best foot forward. “My wines are as natural as I can make them,” says Joe Macari of Macari Vineyards in Mattituck. “I don’t want to cover up the delicate fruit and spice flavors with a lot of wood. I want the complexity to reveal itself.”

California and Australia’s warm weather grows grapes that hold more sugar. With relative ease, winemakers there translate this ripe sweetness into big, fruity, fleshy wines. But because Long Island has a comparatively cool climate, its wines are naturally lighter-bodied, with more refreshing crispness. “Our red wines show more red, not black, fruits,” says Chris Tracy of Channing Daughters Winery in Bridgehampton. “They breathe red currants, plums, cherries.”

True, Bordeaux’s temperate weather is like Long Island’s. But climate is only one of the factors that influences wine growing. The sandy loam soil on Long Island, for instance, offers good drainage for the vines, and imparts a different character to the wines than

### IF IT GROWS TOGETHER, IT GOES TOGETHER

When Darrin Siegfried was the education director at the Sommelier Society of America, the nation’s oldest wine teaching organization, he would regularly load his wine captains class onto a bus and hit the Long Island Expressway. “I wanted to show them what was going on on the North Fork,” said Siegfried, who has been wine director at some of New York City’s top restaurants and now owns the Park Slope wine shop Red, White & Bubbly. “I would ask them ‘How many of you have restaurants in the New York City area, but don’t have any Long Island wines on the list,’ and a bunch of hands would go up. Can you think of ever going to any restaurant in France, Italy, Spain, Portugal or any wine producing country that didn’t proudly serve wines made in their area? How could you do this?”

Siegfried feels that Long Island wines are where California wines were 25 years ago, when diners scoffed at West Coast selections in favor of all things French. “For my money, Long Island cabernet franc is better than cabernet franc from any other area in America,” he said. “North Fork chardonnays beat the pants off the Napa Valley chardonnays, which are like chardonnays on steroids.” Because many wine shoppers aren’t yet convinced or even aware of such advantages, Siegfried displays the dozen or so Long Island wines he carries side-by-side with wines from better-known American wine-growing regions.

Saul Bolton, owner and chef of Restaurant Saul in Carroll Gardens, rotates certain Long Island wines through his restaurant simply because “they’re good.” Their understated nature makes them particularly food friendly. Bolton admitted that he can buy food friendly wines from elsewhere, and often for less money. “At the end of the day, it’s a nod to local things,” he said. “You’ve got to patronize local producers whether it’s a vineyard or pigs or whatever.”

Borrowing a phrase he learned from the legendary American cookbook writer Edna Louis, Siegfried described a similar logic for residents of Brooklyn (which is, after all, on Long Island) to choose local wines: “If it grows together, it goes together.”

*Brian Halweil*



“The mid-palate you get here, you don’t get in California,” said John Levenberg, who moved from California’s Russian River Valley to become winemaker at Bedell Cellars in Cutchogue.

the gravelly soil in Bordeaux. East End vintners are just beginning to understand the relationships among their climate, soil, grape varieties, growing practices, and finished product.

Moreover, the small, artisanal wines of Long Island should not be compared to inexpensive wines from large production areas like Australia or California’s Central Valley, where fertile soils allow large volumes of wine to be produced from each vine. Due to the limited production scale, Long Island wines are better compared to other hand-crafted wines from regions with difficult growing conditions, such as the Loire Valley, northern Italy, or Austria. But they need not be expensive. Plenty of expressive Long Island wines can be had for \$15-20.

Long Island is young as a wine region, but as it evolves, two distinctive styles of red wine are emerging. The first is the more structured and serious, expressing “balance, elegance, finesse,” according to Russell Hearn of Cutchogue-based Pellegrini. “Anybody who knows anything about winemaking knows that these qualities are the hardest to achieve, much more difficult than weight and bigness. Besides, we’re not going to out-big any other wine region.”

Ten years ago, Long Island winemakers hadn’t yet learned this, and were trying to make the wines into something

they just weren’t. “Pushing a wine somewhere it doesn’t want to go makes it awkward,” says Hearn. In the past 10 years East End winemakers have learned to let the fruit speak, rather than covering it up by aging too long in new oak barrels.

The second style is lighter bodied, maybe less ambitious, less pretentious. These are meant to be enjoyed, not studied. Channing Daughters’ Pinot Envy is a fresh, Beaujolais style brimming with red fruits. Schneider’s Le Breton is a crisp, light, cherry- and violet-scented wine made only from cabernet franc grapes. (Cabernet franc is known as “Le Breton” in the Loire Valley.) Whether these reds are crafted to drink now or to hold, they share a dark quality on the palate, reminiscent of smoke or tobacco that is part of the Long Island red flavor signature.

This tarry element adds an interesting complexity and personality, a bass note in counterpoint to the higher-toned, bright fruit flavors. It proves that Long Island wines are of interest not because they are local imitations of something else, but distinctive in their own right. “I don’t want to make California wine,” says Macari. “I believe in this region, I believe our wines have something different to say.” □

*Editor’s note: Long Island wines can be found in many wine shops throughout Brooklyn. Fermented Grapes in Prospect Heights, and Prospect Wine Shop and Red, White and Bubbly in Park Slope all have fine selections. McCabe’s Wine and Spirits and Vintage New York in Manhattan have the largest selections in the metropolitan area. For more information on Long Island wines, see [liwines.com](http://liwines.com).*



Christopher Tracy of Channing Daughters Winery in Bridgehampton feels the South Fork’s cool climate yields wines that are naturally lighter bodied and refreshingly crisp.