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Long Island winemakers take sips in the right direction

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They began pouring wine just after breakfast, and by evening the rows of empties had amassed to regimental proportions - bottles of Long Island's finest mixed with the best from growing regions around the world.

The occasion, a Southampton winemakers symposium held last week to examine the challenges and rewards of growing grapes in cooler climates, was the first such conference here in 20 years.

Much has changed in those two decades, with the number of wine producers, most clustered on the North Fork, more than doubled from 24 to 51. Last year, more than a dozen local wines were recognized by prestigious critics with ratings that placed them respectably close to the best in the world. Most importantly, say local vintners, local wines have developed a once-elusive consistency. Long Island's wine region would appear to have arrived.

But not so fast.

Local vintners still face a relative lack of acceptance in restaurants in Manhattan and even on Long Island. Labor worries and rising costs continue to impact the budgets. And then there's the question of whether Long Island wines are distinct enough to stand out on the world's wine list.

During a panel discussion on terroir, the French term that describes the unique characteristics of a wine imparted by geographical and other local influences, the four outside experts strained to identify the essence and particular qualities of Long Island's wines after a day's tasting.

Thomas Laszlo, vice president of winemaking at Heron Hill Winery in Hammondsport, in the Finger Lakes, singled out an "iron ore, almost a rusticity" to the local reds, a trait that he admitted was "going to sound bad," but nevertheless was something "I haven't seen anywhere else in North America."

Paul Grieco, a sommelier and co-owner of Manhattan restaurants Hearth, Insieme and Terroir who has the word "Riesling" tattooed to his inner arm, said finding the best Long Island wines takes work. "It's not uniform," he said, speaking after the panel, adding that local wines have occasionally graced his wine lists. "You have to pick and choose your way. It's not easy."

Gunter Künstler, owner and winemaker of Weingut Künstler in Rheingau, Germany, managed that, "The great thing is the American optimism, your sense of [continuing] to work on it."

Growing pains

That kid-brother treatment from established outsiders is nothing new to Long Island winemakers, whose history is a relative blink compared with the centuries of winemaking in Germany, France and Spain.

Still, some found it ironic that the faint praise comes as Long Island wines are emerging from a long adolescence with more solid underpinnings than they have had in years.

Louisa Hargrave, director of the Stony Brook Center for Food, Wine and Culture, which hosted last week's conference, said the region's best winemakers have the expertise, passion and confidence to fend off the occasional naysayers.

"The leading winemakers are immune to it," said Hargrave, herself a Long Island wine pioneer as co-owner of the former Hargrave Vineyard. "They're tired of hearing, 'Oh, finally, Long Island makes good wine.' It's been happening here for decades," she said.

Local standout

One of the most welcomed moments in last week's conference came when Steve Clifton, owner and winemaker at Santa Barbara, Calif., wineries Palmina and Brewer-Clifton, spoke of the evolution of his own growing region.

"The most striking thing about this trip for me is, I feel as though I'm in Santa Barbara 10 years ago," he said of Long Island. "I think the wines from [Long Island] are as world class as from any region I've been in."

One wine that is frequently mentioned among the top local picks is Wolffer Estate in Sagaponack, whose winemaker, Roman Roth, is quick to characterize and defend the local terroir.

"The essence of our cool ocean breezes slows down the ripening," he said, while the clay-loam salt soil mixed with sand creates ideal growing conditions. "That's what makes us so different from the Finger Lakes," for instance. "We have an amazing sun influence, yet this cooler breeze." It makes the wine "food friendly," infusing whites with "fresh acidity, intense yet elegant."

Laszlo of the Finger Lakes said Long Island whites, dominated by chardonnays, suffer from a sameness that he'd like to see stamped out by the use of more blended white wines. "They've got to get away from this heavier, buttery chardonnay," he said. "Nobody buys those whites from Long Island."

Striving to gain acceptance

Hargrave said she remains perplexed that more Long Island restaurants don't carry the local wines. "It's completely insane for the restaurants not to embrace it," she said.

Manhattan restaurants, too, remain a challenge, with most opting for more widely recognized labels from France and Napa Valley in California. Steve Bate, executive director of the Long Island Wine Council, said the advocacy group will increase promotion over the next month in the vital Manhattan market through use of \$250,000 in grants, mostly from the state.

Some vintners are banking on the increased value of the euro, making it more expensive to import some European wines, as a boon to local wines, which are cheap by comparison. "The euro is so high that imports are down," said Rich Pisacano, owner of Roanoke Vineyards in Riverhead.

But costs here are up, too, including a 30 percent jump for oak barrels in the past year, said Jim Waters, owner of Waters Crest Winery in Cutchogue.

Those financial concerns would not matter as much if local wines had the widespread acceptance of

regions such as Santa Barbara. Clifton, who credited the 2004 movie "Sideways" for stoking global interest in the region, told local winemakers it's not so much what the critics say or the price you get. "The most important thing," he said, "is to make wines from our regions and stand behind them and realize the uniqueness of where we are."

Aging well

The Long Island wine industry has grown dramatically in the past 20 years.

Wine Producers

Then: 24

Now: 51.

Production.

Then: 100,000 cases

Now: 500,000 cases.

Visitors to region.

Then: 120,000

Now: 1.2 million

Source: The Long Island Wine Council.

Check out our gallery of wineries and other things to do on Long Island's East End at newsday.com/explore

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