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**RED BURGUNDY 2011:  
FRESH AND ELEGANT**

**LONG ISLAND  
TRAILBLAZERS**

JUNE 15, 2014







Vineyards and pasture land of McCall Wines on the North Fork of Long Island, fronted by Peconic Bay.

# Long Island's RISING TIDE

IN NEW YORK'S COASTAL VINEYARD REGION, THREE WINERIES SHOW THE WAY / **BY BEN O'DONNELL**

**O**n the East End of Long Island, winemakers pray to the sea. About 75 miles east of Manhattan, the island's twin forks open like a crab claw. Between them is Peconic Bay, with the North Fork jutting into Long Island Sound and the South Fork in thrall to the Atlantic Ocean.

In good years, the sea nurtures and protects this small wine region, holding temperatures steady and allowing a long growing

season in which grapes can retain fresh acidity while flavors develop amply. But the sea can also thrash Long Island. Maritime climates are humid, and some vintages are lacerated by constant rain, even hurricanes.

For reds, Merlot stars here, and has for decades; Bordeaux, which also relies on Merlot in a maritime climate, has long been a reference point (though the French region dwarfs Long Island's 3,000



acres under vine). At McCall Wines, winemaker Gilles Martin bottles Merlot and Cabernet Franc (and blends). “If we are compared to Bordeaux, I am very pleased,” says the France-born winemaker. “But I don’t want to make Bordeaux wines.”

And indeed, Martin makes Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc, as well as sparkling wine from Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier in the *méthode traditionnelle*, for other of his clients. Increasingly, Long Island winemakers have been seeking their own, more local path—experimenting with different varieties, clones and rootstocks, learning how to work intelligently and conscientiously in this unique place.

The most visible recent evidence of this is the Long Island Sustainable Winegrowing initiative (LISW), a brainchild of veteran winemaker Richard Olsen-Harbich. The best-practices certification launched in 2012 with four members; now it encompasses 18 wineries and 800 acres. In just two years, 25 percent of the region’s vine land has achieved certification.

The LISW takes a kitchen-sink approach that ranges from recycling grape pomace to providing winery employees with clear goals and job descriptions to regularly evaluating how vineyard treatments affect the water that is Long Island’s blood. “We have people working on biodynamic, holistic approaches and we have Cornell scientists,” says Olsen-Harbich.

It’s an exciting time for Long Island wine, and in the stories of three very different but similarly impressive producers—Wölffer Estate, McCall Wines and Bedell Cellars—you can get a glimpse of why that is.

## WÖLFFER ESTATE

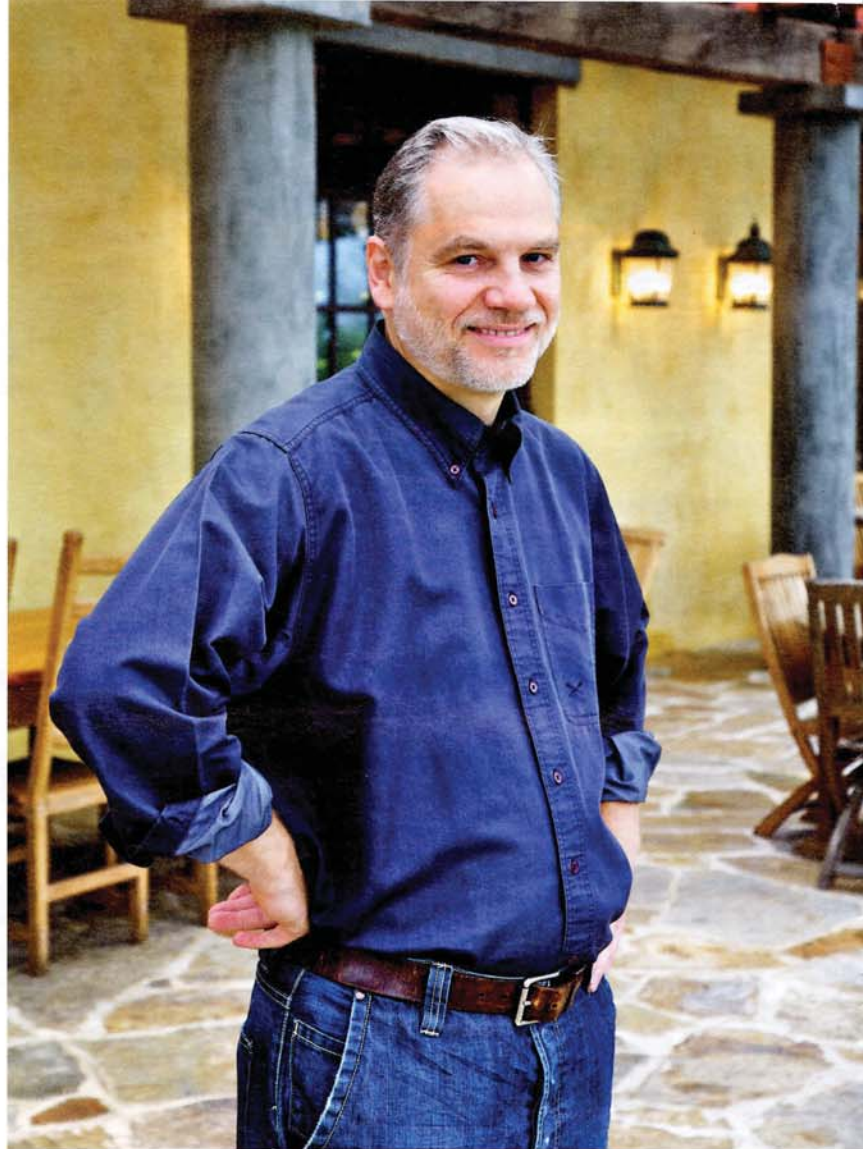
In 2013, Marc Wölffer, a restaurateur based in Mallorca, and his sister Joey Wölffer, founder of the “mobile fashion boutique” Styleliner, consolidated ownership of their family’s Wölffer Estate. Germany-born Roman Roth stayed on as winemaker and became a partner, while Richie Pisacano, a longtime local grapegrower, remained as vineyard manager.

What drew this diverse crew to Wölffer Estate was founder Christian Wölffer’s enduring vision for the property, still compelling five years after his death at 70 in a swimming accident.

When Wölffer, a native German, bought a potato farm on the South Fork in 1978, he at first simply saw it as a hangout spot near the shore, where he could retreat from the pressures of venture capital and real estate in New York.

One night at a party, a friend bragged about the wine he was pouring, homemade right there on Long Island. Wölffer’s response (paraphrased by Marc): “You know what, if you can produce this kind of quality wine, I’ll show you what good wine can taste like.” Wölffer’s vines were planted in 1988, and by 1992, he was ready to hire a winemaker and go commercial. That’s when he found Roth.

Roman Roth, now 48, thought he might want to be a chef growing up, “but I didn’t like the weekend hours. You always worked when your friends are partying.” Like plenty



Roman Roth has made the wines at Wölffer since its first commercial vintage in 1992. Today, he partners with the founder’s children at the estate, known for barrel-aged Merlot and a dry rosé.

of Germans from winemaking families, he was taught that wine was Riesling. “In Germany, your grandfather already knows how to make the best wine. ‘What are you telling me—you can’t change anything!’” But stints at Rosemount, in South Australia, and Sainsbury in Napa Valley, left Roth wide-eyed. “In America and Australia, it was the complete opposite,” he says.

In the 1990s, relatively early on in Long Island’s winemaking history, there wasn’t much you couldn’t try. Roth took full advantage, tending to staples like Merlot and Chardonnay, but also toying with sparkling wine (and more recently, Trebbiano).

One of Wölffer’s early hits was (and is) a dry rosé—a bold move back in the white Zinfandel years—most likely before anyone else on the East End made one. Now, “everything I touch turns pink!” jokes Roth. The winery has been riding the recent rosé wave, now producing 17,000 cases a year. “By August, it’s sold out. We’ve created a monster!”

The rosé, though value-priced, is a careful construction. After fermentation, it gets a few months *sur lie*, with the payoff being a creamy texture and the addition of hay notes to the light berry flavors (2012; 88, \$16).





Wölffer currently produces a total of about 37,500 cases a year—No. 2 on Long Island. As of 2012, the lineup includes two hard ciders. Roth wanted to tint one pink, so he added a dollop of grape extract.

Seated in an alcove of his barrel cellar, Roth compares two prestige bottlings. The Wölffer Christian's Cuvée Merlot (2010; 87, \$100) comprises estate-grown fruit from the South Fork. Originally a side project for Roth, The Grapes of Roth Merlot, which receives extended aging at the winery before release (2007; 91, \$50), is made from North Fork grapes. To varying degrees, Roth makes all his fine wines—red and white—with new oak, lees contact and limited *bâtonnage*. The Christian's Cuvée and Grapes of Roth Merlots each get nearly two years in new oak, with racking every four months.

Roth studies a list of pH and Brix levels; the numbers confirm what he can already taste in the glass. The vineyard for the Grapes of Roth is close to the base of the fork, the site slightly warmer. In consequence, this Merlot is a touch denser, with more dark fruit and chocolate notes. The cooler climate of the South Fork site shows in the Christian's Cuvée, where intensity and minerality come to the fore.

The principals at Wölffer each bring something different to the table. Pisacano, 52, is a Long Island lifer who started working vines on the North Fork in 1976; by age 21, he was selling grapes to area's early winemakers of the 1970s and '80s: "All the pioneers were coming to us, and we knew more than them, but not a lot," he says.

Marc Wölffer, 47, has followed an "island-hopping" life that's taken him from Havana to Hawaii to Spain's Mallorca, where he has restaurants and a vineyard, to Long Island.

Joey Wölffer, 31, a New Yorker born and raised, was initially uncertain about her role in the winery's future. "I always loved a gin and tonic. I never really was passionate about wine," she says now. But she had a road-to-Damascus moment after her father's death. "I just felt this sudden sadness. I wanted it to be in my future, a legacy. And I was so proud of my dad."

With fresh endeavors such as the ciders and a new rosé with a psychedelic label—a Joey project—Wölffer is a perpetual motion machine. That's fine by Roth. "It's great to have young blood again," he says. "You're not becoming stale as a result."

## MCCALL WINES

Though Russell McCall only began bottling wines under his own label with the 2007 vintage, the story of his family in Cutchogue goes back to Russell Walker, McCall's great-grandfather, who drove a buggy out and put up a little vacation home in the area at the turn of the 20th century.

By 1996, the woods nearby and an adjacent potato farm were headed for development: 50 new getaway cottages, unwelcome neighbors to McCall's old place. By then, McCall had built a successful wine distribution company, Atlanta Wholesale Wine, in Georgia, and he had both the preservationist's instinct and the coin to block the transaction.

When he bought the property, he turned over the woods to the town, under an agreement that it remain unspoiled. The potato acreage would still be a farm, but it was Bordeaux and Burgundy, not Idaho, that had bewitched McCall, 70, since he started in wine in the 1960s. Ten acres would go to Merlot, a sure-footed standby; 11 to Pinot Noir, a total wildcard.

"They told me that you couldn't plant [Pinot Noir]. Said it's [been] nothing but a failure," McCall recalls. Undeterred, he sent a viticulturist to Oregon's WillaKenzie Estate to investigate, and the man returned with cuttings of four clones. They settled on a site with sandy soils that would drain well, and put the shoots in just three feet apart, so they'd compete for nutrients.

Ten years passed. Pruning aggressively and picking selectively—yields are as low as 1.5 tons per acre—McCall made a Pinot. (Previously he had sold grapes to other wineries.) It'll never be much of a moneymaker in such vintage-variable *terroir*. But "to watch people's face light up and say, 'I can't believe this is from Long Island,'" makes it worth the effort for Russell McCall.

Though McCall takes pride in his Pinots (the 2010 Reserve



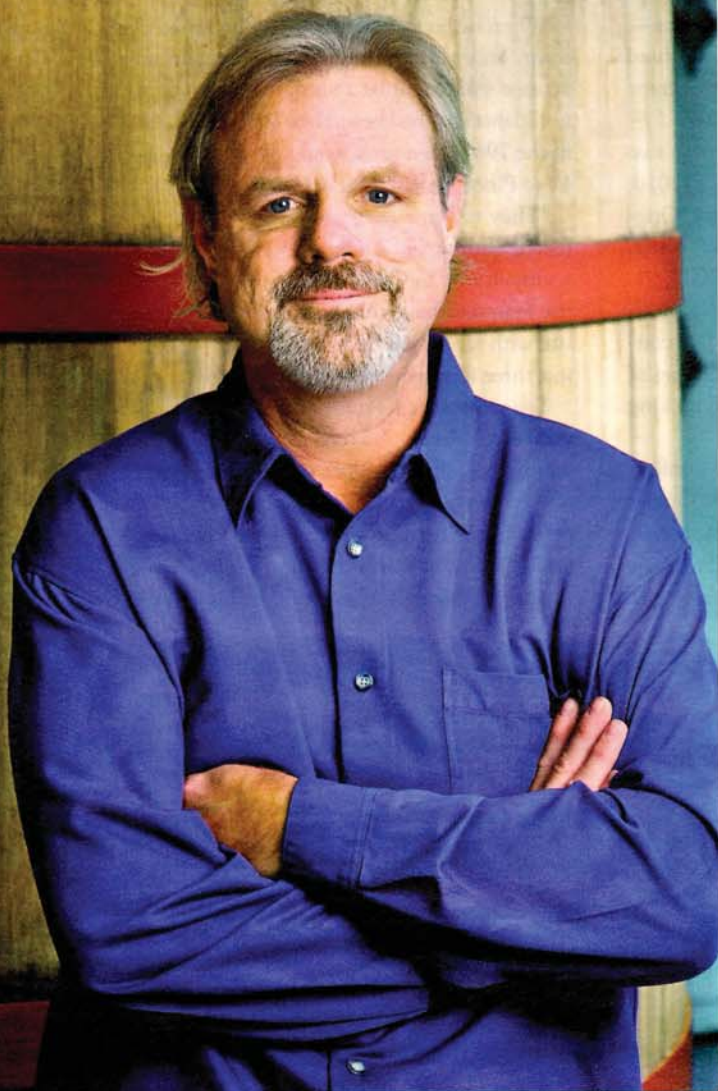
Russell McCall, a wine distributor-turned-winemaker, converted a defunct potato farm into sustainable vineyards planted to Pinot Noir, a rarity in the region, and Merlot. He also raises Charolais cattle.

scored 87 points; \$48), he believes Long Island shines brightest with Bordeaux blends: "To me, it's like a little slice of the Right Bank." His version, Ben's Blend, is a Merlot-dominated cuvée with a judicious measure of Cabernet Franc and splashes of Petit Verdot and Cabernet Sauvignon, made only in the best vintages; so far, 2007 (91 points, \$48), 2010 (NYR) and 2013 (not yet bottled).

In tune with their preservationist outlook, the McCalls think a lot about the future. Targeting 2,500 to 4,000 cases in all, they intend to stay trim. They farm sustainably, raise Charolais cattle on the property organically and were the first estate to erect a windmill to generate energy.

"The grapes really saved us, I think," reckons Russell McCall's son Brewster, 32, who helps with sustainability initiatives, along with other work at the winery. "If it weren't for viticulture offering





Winemaker Richard Olsen-Harbich brings decades of experience with Long Island *terroir* to Bedell, one of the region's pioneering wineries. He is also a founder of the Long Island Sustainable Winegrowing initiative.

farmers a high-yielding cash crop, then this”—the bucolic North Fork of today—“would’ve all been a very different story.”

## BEDELL CELLARS

**R**ichard Olsen-Harbich has a knack with dirt. A painter, writer and five-string banjoist, Olsen-Harbich, 53, is a Long Island native. When he grew up, Cornell agriculture school seemed a natural fit: “I wanted to be in the outdoors, growing things and creating things.” After graduation, he took a job as vineyard manager for a new winery called Bridgehampton; 34 vintages later, he’s still on the East End.

Around the same time, in 1980, Kip Bedell took his home wine-making passion to the next level, planting vines in Cutchogue. Bedell was an early champion of innovations now taken for granted: cover crops, nutrient analysis, barrel fermentation, even the popularization of Merlot in the region. Before Bedell and others began to use protective bird-netting, harvest had to conclude by Columbus Day, “simply because flocks of birds would completely annihilate the crop,” recalls Olsen-Harbich.

By the time New Line Cinema president Michael Lynne began looking to purchase a vineyard on Long Island in the late 1990s, he shared a popular opinion: “I had identified pretty early on that I thought Kip Bedell had the most exciting property there.”

Lynne oversaw production and distribution of the *Lord of the Rings*, *Blade*, *Austin Powers* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchises, to name a few, and came to see the art in wine as well. After purchasing Bedell in 2000, Lynne set about making investments in equipment and personnel.

The final flourish would be on the bottle. As a longtime art collector and a Museum of Modern Art board member, Lynne tapped artist friends to decorate his bottles—Eric Fischl, April Gornick, Ross Bleckner, Chuck Close. Perhaps most striking is the art on the red, white and rosé blends called Taste (the 2010 red, \$60, earned 90 points; the latest releases of the white and rosé are yet to be reviewed). By Barbara Kruger, the image is a black-and-white closeup of a blond bombshell’s face, lips parted, the word “taste” in red between them; Lynne saw it and decided the wines would be so named.

In 2010, Lynne hired Olsen-Harbich as winemaker. Bedell isn’t massive, at 12,000 to 15,000 cases a year, but there are many moving parts, with 80 acres to be divided into 50 or 60 lots for vinification.

Few have been as methodical as Olsen-Harbich in interrogating the *terroir*. He points out decades-old vines, thick and gnarled as an old sailor’s biceps—some of the oldest Riesling in the state, some of the oldest Gewürztraminer—as he trudges through 5 inches of snow. But over there is Albariño, pretty new in town but already right at home, even in the damp years. Olsen-Harbich is planting more Malbec and Syrah, too, but digging even deeper, he’s matching clones to rootstocks to patches of land, ever in

pursuit of what Long Island can achieve.

**A**ll this work has paid off in the bottle. “In the summer, because I’m out there, pretty much exclusively I’m drinking Long Island wines,” says star chef Tom Colicchio, who has a Mattituck residence and oversees Topping Rose House in Bridgehampton as well as several Manhattan venues. In his restaurants, “twelve years ago, it was a little more of a hand-sell, but now I’m serving the stuff with pride, because I think they’ve become world-class wines.”

Today, a new generation working in Long Island wine, people like Brewster McCall and Joey Wölffer, is bringing fresh perspectives on how to achieve vinous excellence in the region. The excitement has sommeliers, retailers and consumers taking notice, not just of the three wineries profiled here, but of producers such as Channing Daughters, Shinn, Sparkling Pointe, Paumanok, Pellegrini, Lieb, Lenz, Macari, Corey Creek (a Bedell label) and Anthony Nappa Wines. These exemplars are pushing themselves, and each other, to capture the best possible wines from what the land—and the sea—gives them. □