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OCTOBER 2005

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My Parents Are Driving Me to Drink

Will his parents liquidate IRAs to buy Merlot? Alarmed, writer Chip Brown considers this on a family trip in Long Island wine country.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN KERNICK



TOP: The author and his family, at Wölffer Estate, are joined by Christian Wölffer (in purple shirt).

IF YOU EXCLUDE SCRABBLE, WINE IS MY FAMILY'S ONLY SACRAMENT. ALL OF MY siblings are grown, but we still count on wine to enhance the harmony of holiday reunions—or if tensions are running high, to at least make reunions bearable.

In their younger years, my parents drank mostly plonk. Their sense of what a bottle should cost was cramped by genetic Yankee thrift, but they also had four kids to put through college. When you live in the valley of *vin ordinaire*, you appreciate wine summits that much more. My mother relished in-law dinner parties not because my dad's father served good wine but because my great-uncle Gordon stashed bottles of Domaine Romanée-Conti in the trunk of his car and would share them with any guests who had the sense to freshen their drinks in the driveway.

My parents are in their eighties now. Since many of the friends they once raised a glass with are gone, certain wines are imbued with ghosts. The name Château d'Yquem recalls the ardent spirit of our neighbor Mr. Reiss, with whom they shared a bottle not long before he died. These charged associations underscore something I've learned as I've gotten older myself: It's not soil or slope or climate that is the predominant element of a wine's *terroir*—it's memory.

With that in mind, I invited my parents to spend a couple of days last summer poking around the North and South Forks of eastern Long Island, where seven new

wineries have opened in just the past two years. Historically, our family trips have been fiascoes, plagued by everything from eruptions of Oedipal tensions to infestations of sand fleas. But lately the shadow of mortality has made me prize the time I can spend with my parents. When I proposed the trip, they jumped. It had been a hard winter. They had traded the house they loved in Arizona for spots in an assisted-living village. In the midst of the move, my mother had lung cancer surgery. A week later her last sister died. They had not yet met my new baby, India, their first and only granddaughter, who was now five months old.

My parents arrived on a Friday afternoon at the house my wife, Kate, and I had rented for the summer in Sag Harbor, on the South Fork. Oliver, our six-year-old son, was outside trying to launch a foam missile with a burst of air by jumping on a plastic bladder. He dashed excitedly into the living room.

"The stomp rocket works!" he said.

"What?" my father responded.

"The stomp rocket works!"

"Oh, I thought you said, 'The stock market works.' My hopes soared."

Even if you're middle-aged with children of your own, it's always vaguely infantilizing to go out with your parents. At **Almondito**, a sleek new Mexican restaurant in Wainscott, a lot of sun-kissed women were stomping around in high heels; none had their parents in tow. Still, the baked striped bass, topped with chopped tomatoes, olives and jalapeños, was delicious. So was the 2001 Schneider Cabernet Franc, a North Fork wine with plummy fruit and soft tannins. When I'd tasted it some time before, it had come across as an oaky muddle. Did it seem better because my parents were enjoying it? They had advanced into the state of grace in which the temptation to find fault is eclipsed by the desire to praise.

On Saturday we drove to **Wölffer Estate** in Sagaponack, one of the wineries on the South Fork. Proprietor Christian Wölffer and winemaker Roman Roth met us

Chip Brown is the author, most recently, of Good Morning Midnight: Life and Death in the Wild.



Two-year-old Vine Street Café is a welcome relief from the Hamptons scene.



Perfect Wine Weekend

Wineries

For more information, go to liwines.com, the Long Island Wine Council's Web site.

Bedell Cellars Maker of some of the area's best Merlot.
DETAILS 36225 Main Rd., Cutchogue; 631-734-7537.

Macari Vineyards Be sure to try the 2001 Bergen Road.
DETAILS 150 Bergen Ave., Mattituck; 631-298-0100.

Peconic Bay Winery Best known for its Riesling.
DETAILS 31320 Main Rd., Cutchogue; 631-734-7361.

Wölffer Estate Its Premier Cru Merlot helped put Long Island wines on the map.

DETAILS 139 Sagg Rd., Sagaponack; 631-537-5106.

Restaurants

Almondito Trendy new Mexican restaurant.

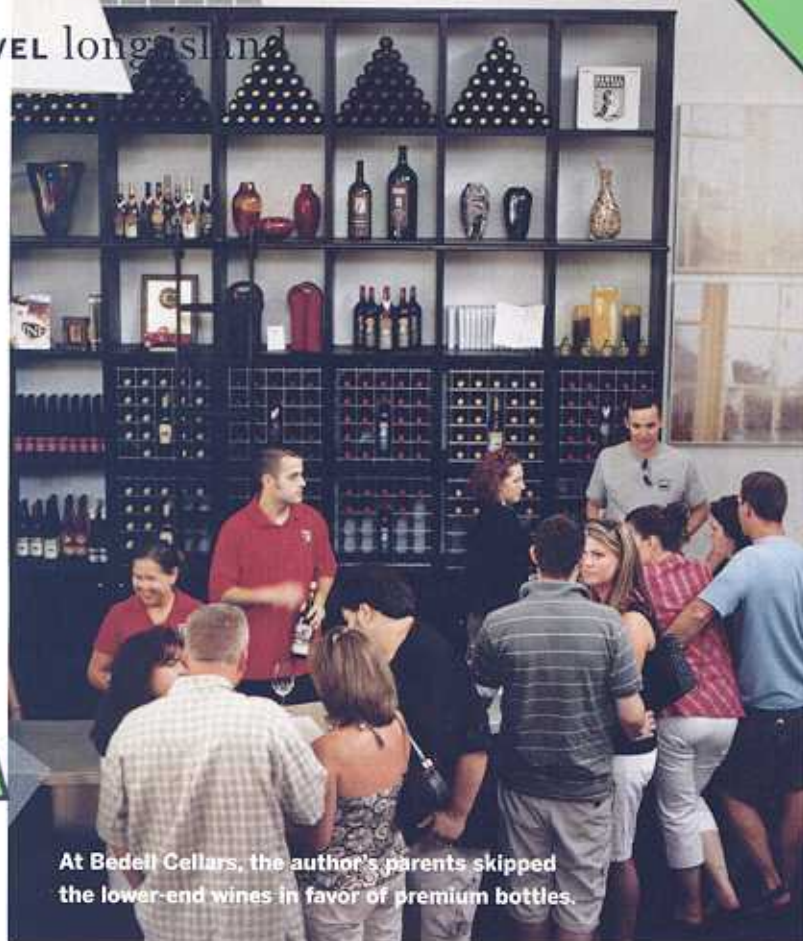
DETAILS 290 Montauk Hwy., Wainscott; 631-329-6700.

Annona Italian spot opened above a luxury-car dealership. Sara Jenkins, formerly of Manhattan's 50 Carmine, is chef; 5 Ninth's chef Zak Pelaccio is a consultant.

DETAILS 112 Riverhead Rd., Westhampton Beach; 631-288-7766.

Vine Street Café The chef-owners, alums of Manhattan's Union Square Cafe, rely on local organic ingredients.

DETAILS 41 S. Ferry Rd., Shelter Island; 631-749-3210.



At Bedell Cellars, the author's parents skipped the lower-end wines in favor of premium bottles.



Alarmed, I realized he was right. Even my father, who for many years has had a diminished sense of taste and smell after cracking his skull on a birch tree behind our family house, seemed to be falling under a liquidate-your-IRA spell. I realized that if my parents were going to retain their financial independence, I had to get them out of there. Fortunately, after the seductive 2004 Late Harvest Chardonnay, which we sampled above ground under a vine-draped pergola, they were ready for a nap.

My parents rallied that evening for dinner on Shelter Island at the **Vine Street Café**, an unpretentious white-shingled restaurant overlooking a forested ravine. Chefs Terry Harwood and Lisa Murphy, who married after working together at Manhattan's Union Square Café, opened the place two years ago. Terry handles the savory courses and Lisa the sweet ones.

under the chandeliers and barn beams of the elegant tasting room. Grapes were first planted here in 1988, Roth told us; now 50 acres of Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet Franc yield 16,000 cases annually.

Advised there was a ghost about, Oliver stayed close when we all descended the stairs to the cool gloom of the cellar. Many of the French oak barrels had been autographed by visiting celebrities like Billy Joel and Julia Child. We sat around a half-moon-shaped table tasting the top Wölffer wines. Everyone used the spit bucket except my mother. "I'm too old to spit," she said.

We moved from a Burgundy-style 2002 Pinot to the \$40-a-bottle 2002 Cabernet Franc. "I like the Pinot more," my mother said. "The Cabernet Franc is out of my price range."

"The Pinot is \$50 a bottle," Wölffer responded.

She gulped, first air, then what was left in her glass.

Wölffer opened a half-bottle of the 2001 Premier Cru Merlot, which lists for \$125, the highest price ever for a Long Island wine. Among the Hummer-driving fat cats who have propelled Hamptons real estate into the stratosphere, it's something of a status item, or a least a fallback option if a California cult cab or some Bordeaux thoroughbred is unavailable.

"This is getting in your league," Wölffer said to my mother.

I had Prince Edward Island mussels in basil-saffron broth, while my father ordered seared diver scallops on a bed of sweet corn succotash with edamame and red peppers; both dishes paired well with a refreshing 2003 Peconic Bay Riesling. The dessert specialty was a fantastic pineapple tart that Kate had to guard from being pillaged by her dinner companions. The rustic setting and homespun barn ambiance were so far from the slickness of the Hamptons that it felt like going back in time.

On Sunday, my parents and I traveled by ferry to Greenport, on the North Fork. It's subtly different in growing conditions than the South Fork (the vines bud a week earlier in the sandier soils) and radically different in tone, with metal sheds and working boatyards, churches and roadside markets, and middle-class houses instead of gated mansions. That said, the wine industry has transformed the place like few others outside California. In 1995, there were only 14 wineries on the North Fork. Now there are 34, producing 450,000 cases a year. The pioneers who planted the wrong grapes in

the wrong places and experimented with clones and trellis systems that were unsuited to the local conditions are now giving way to a new generation of wealthy owners who are investing millions to add acreage, upgrade facilities and bring in famous consultants. But perhaps the biggest reason for the area's growing reputation is that older vines typically produce better wine and many of those on Long Island have some age on them.

I'd been hoping to squeeze in visits to three of the best vineyards, Bedell, Macari and Peconic Bay. But octogenarians can't be rushed. And my mother is a master of the art of the prolonged chat, which makes it hard to rip through a bunch of appointments. Thankfully, we started at the summit: **Bedell Cellars** in Cutchogue, whose wines are widely acknowledged as the benchmark of Long Island Merlots. Long Island's cool maritime climate produces reds like Bedell's that are more like Bordeaux's than California's; they're lower in alcohol and more food-friendly.

Kip Bedell began his career pumping heating oil for his family's business and made wine only as a hobby. He released his first commercial bottles in 1985. After an exceptional 1988 vintage and a string of well-received wines in the '90s, people began calling him Mr. Merlot. "At least now I can drink what I pump," he said. In 2000, Bedell agreed to sell the winery for \$5 million to Michael Lynne, the co-chairman and co-chief executive of New Line Cinema, who the year before had bought nearby Corey Creek Vineyards for \$2 million. Lynne promised Bedell he could stay on as winemaker, and Bedell is now collaborating with consultant Pascal Marty, who was director of wine-making at Baron Philippe de Rothschild.

In the tasting room, I noticed that my parents were happy to skip the lower-end wines, like the \$14 Main Road Red, a fruity Merlot blend, in favor of the premium stuff—the 2000 Bedell Cupola, an elegant Bordeaux-style blend, and the 2001 and 2002 Reserve Merlot.

Bedell took a scrutinizing sip of the 2001 Reserve Merlot, the umpteenth time he'd tasted it. "I like this but it is not my favorite," he said.

"What's your favorite?" I asked.

He laughed. "For everyday drinking I really like the Main Road Red."

He suddenly reminded me of my parents and the values they'd embodied just two days ago, before they started touring Long Island wineries. I looked over and saw the astonishing sight of my mother, credit card out, springing for a case of the 2001 Bedell Merlot in half bottles.

"Mom, what are you doing?"

"Half bottles are the perfect size," she said.

Thank God the Reserve Merlot didn't come in half bottles. I spotted my father eyeing a Bedell Late Harvest Riesling at \$39 a throw. How could I begrudge him a few bottles when a sweet wine improved his chess game so dramatically? The last time we'd played, the two of us had polished off a late-harvest Riesling from California, and I'd never seen him fianchetto a bishop so skillfully.

We'd already stayed an hour longer than I'd planned, mostly because my parents seemed so happy. We had a lunch to get to—and promises to visit two more wineries. Promises we would not keep. And I didn't care, because here was a memory I would have forever: my parents walking out of a winery together on a beautiful summer afternoon. They had altered the *terroir* of the Bedell Merlot, and I know whenever I drink that wine, I'll taste the day. •

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