

oz clarke's adventures

Bonnie Drank Bridgehampton

Exploring Long Island wine, past perfect and future

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Once upon a time, many years ago, Bonnie drank Bridgehampton. Usually the Sauvignon Blanc. Tangy, prickly, delicious. "We should drink local," she said, as I gazed at her befuddled with delight. "Local. Local... yes... we should." Where is Bridgehampton? Local... somewhere. Did I ask? No. Was I happy? Yes.

And Amy drank Hargrave. Wild, wistful Amy had somehow snagged Hargrave in her flowing tresses, so we drank that. Long Island's first superstars, the Lords of North Fork, brilliant, unpredictable reds and succulent whites, Amy and I drank those.



That was long ago and I needed to visit. And I knew I'd like it. Kerouac and Fitzgerald—that's South Fork, Amy reminded me. Could it really be any different? Well, yes. I quickly discovered that my fantasies of beat poetry and beach posing might inhabit the jam-packed exclusivity of the South Fork, but the forests and gardens, sod farms and orchards and vineyards of the North Fork were where I was going to feel at home.

So on my first visit to Long Island, we were hardly out of Riverhead when I saw my first vineyard, but I sensed the sea air by then. You didn't have to see the water to know that you were being hemmed in by the coast. You could feel it, suck it in from the atmosphere. The Médoc in Bordeaux is just like that. Hargrave's reds had made me think of Bordeaux, and I was beginning to understand why.

Fast forward to my recent trip to New York when I had a few hours off. I didn't have time to do a full vineyard trip, so I just went to Bedell, whose wines I tasted most recently in London. This summer of 2010 may have frazzled a lot of the Northeast, but the stiff briny breeze that bounded in from the Long Island Sound kept *me* cool in the blazing brilliance of a perfect October day, and must do the same for the grapes as they stride to ripeness in late summer.

Rich Olsen-Harbich, Bedell's winemaker, said 2010 was such a belter that even the maritime winds couldn't keep him from bringing in some of his harvest up to a month early. Usually he sees his sugars, acids and flavors all converging at the same time. Not this year. By mid-September, his sugars were way high enough, but the flavors weren't there—California on great Peconic Bay. But then, he said, it was as though the blistering summer had exhausted itself, the season had no more warmth to give, and a strange cold descended on the Island. So Rich could leave his boisterous crop on the vine, in the gloaming cool—no longer worrying about sugar, but thrilling to the flavors his grapes were building as they caught their breath amongst the browning leaves.

His whites were where he wanted them by late-September—that's at about 12.8 percent potential alcohol for a marvelously fresh Chardonnay that he's fermented with wild yeasts in wood (only about 15 percent new) and with beach pebbles in the barrel. And there's me thinking I often get a wonderfully appetizing taste of salt on Bedell whites, particularly their juicy, crunchy, spicy—and salty—First Crush, which mixes Chardonnay, Sauvignon and Viognier.

Rich's Malbec is so purple the glass is scarred for life; it's packed with floral scent and the chewy juiciness of damson (black plum) peels. High acids, good tannins, and only 13 percent alcohol after being picked Sept. 30. Rich thinks his local yeasts have a low rate of conversion to alcohol. I believe him, and tell him he should commercialize them right away for a world exhausted by big bruising reds and head-spinning whites.

The Syrah—yes, the *Syrah*—is barely finished, as sludgy as a smoothie on first taste, but with fabulous blackberry, blueberry flavor and violet scent. And they say Syrah is a hot-climate variety. Merlot—for once a lovely scented style, raspberries running to black plums along a taut high wire of acidity. And Cabernet Franc. How did you make this? Fourteen and a half percent alcohol. That's just what it wanted to be. And good? Oh. So rich and ripe, so full of almond paste and juicy raspberry fruit you can even taste the pits wedged between your teeth.

The sun sets. Beautiful. Just a little melancholy. I often find American sunsets melancholy. Perhaps because I'm always a traveler here, always heading west.

Next stop, Texas.



Caroline Mann

Oz Clarke tastes barrel samples with Bedell Cellars winemaker Richard Olsen-Harbich.