Although going for only 30 years, Long Island’s increasingly self-confident and self-critical producers now offer distinctive wines from 30 varieties. David Schildknecht offers a guide to the region’s top producers and wines.

V

isitors to Manhattan from afar touch ground first on Long Island, at La Guardia or Kennedy airports. Few realize that 90 minutes’ drive would take them to one of North America’s most promising wine-growing regions, in what seems another world from New York City. Pans of relentless rows of fenestres pass Flushing Meadows, site of New York’s 1933 World’s Fair, pass Levittown, where in 1937 Abraham Levitt and sons raised America’s first mass-produced houses and planned communities on former potato fields. Pass Long Beach, Jones Beach, and the huge yet narrow barrier strip of Fire Island, playgrounds and lungs of the city, and eventually suburbs give way to sprawling, verdant, verges of the island, and remaining cores of 18th-century villages with their New-Schmaltz town greens, clapboard houses, and tall, white church steeples. One has arrived at the so-called East End. In colonial times, this was indeed part of New England specifically Conneciticut, the state hinging north across Long Island Sound. To the south lies the open Atlantic. Where vineyards begin, Long Island splits, The Hamptons and the North Fork separate the island into the ocean and enclosing the Peconic Bay. Those factors that define this young wine region are manifest from a traveler’s first moments. Viticulturally, they are water, wind, and loam, barely undulating farmland. Commercially, a grower’s fate is tethered to the metropolitan giant next door. As veteran viticulturalist Steve Mudd neatly summarized this region’s climatic circumstances for a local journalist: “We’re just a pencil sitting out in the ocean. And we’re 8 miles [13 km] from the biggest wine market in the world.”

Louisa Hargrave and her husband Alex began with 10,000 cuttings in 1972, after having convinced themselves—without compelling reasons, as she admits today—that Long Island offered compelling viticultural opportunities. Only a year later Chris Baiz planted Hargrave vines to establish The Old Field after buying and planting his grandmother’s estate on Peconic Bay. That same year, David Schildknecht, drummer of David’s son Steve—has planted half the grapes on Long Island.)

On the heels of these pioneers came Hamburg-born Christian Wolffer in 1978, who admits, “I had no bloody idea what I was doing when I started,” and a few years thereafter Chip Bedell and the Lebanese-born brothers Philip and Carlos of Charles and Ursula Massoud. They tasted Hargrave’s first wines, explains Massoud, before starting Pommard Vineyards. “However, it wasn’t any wine we tasted that influenced our decision. Rather, it was the conviction that we developed as we understood the quality of the soil and weather. At the time, there were very few wines being made here; the vines were young, and winemaking skills were limited. So we gambled on Mother Nature—an act of faith or folly.” Around this time, Cornell University’s Long Island Viticultural Research station hired Californian Larry Perrine, who says he arrived in New York solely on the inspiration of a Times article that proclaimed a vinous revival in the Finger Lakes. Perrine, too, went on to have a profound influence on the local learning curve.

Farm average converted to wines did not absolve easily its yield secrets. The early-1980s experience of the Petricelli family, at what became their Raphael Vineyards, was not uncommon or mysterious. Several years of plowing over crops back into the soil were needed to re-establish an acceptable level of organic material on land that had been worn out by years of unremitting, cabbage and potato farming. Less obvious in origin, and initially resistant to explanation or treatment, were elevated levels of potassium and consequent pH imbalances in early Long Island wines. English-born Peter Carroll—an engineer—and his winemaking, André Teobald and disciple Eric Fry at Leelanau Winery, eventually stumbled upon a means to abate the source of this widespread problem. It seems that North Fork loam is abnormally high in aluminum, a metal generally harmlessly locked into the soil, becoming active only when pH is extremely low. In such cases, the vines scavenged potassium from the soil to buffer aluminum. A machine was designed to penetrate the soil with granular lime, after which root penetration, foliage retention, and thus the entire processes of nutritioneverything welling up, among nothing of the vinous imbalance having been corrected.

University of Bordeaux soil specialist Professor Bernard Seguin—whose visits to Long Island over the past decade encouraged and enlightened growers—is said to have compared the island’s fast-draining, clay-poor soils with those of Graves, though their mixture of loam with sand and gravel, compared to Margaux or the southern Médoc, does not seem far fetched. Who would not be flattered by—indeed, who could fail to notice—an at least superficial resemblance of Long Island to Bordeaux? There is, however, considerably more direct oceanic influence on this island than between the Atlantic and the Gironde, as even a glance at its exposed position on the map suggests. A frost-free growing period of more than seven months, as well as virtually continual ocean breezes to ward off humidity and pestilence, combine with generally cool summer evenings for the opportunity to achieve late, slowly accumulated ripeness at relatively low sugar levels. But it would be somewhat misleading to call the effects of nearly omnipresent ventilation “tempering,” since temperatures and rainfall can vary enormously from year to year. Heat and drought that frequently accompany these oceanic breezes can be as devastating as irrigation’s. The vines here, despite the significant—and in some cases economically devastating—loss of grapes, those bunches that were driven by this harsh baptism intact did not succumb to the weather. Growing here was made bearable by using improved cultivars, minimizing on-farm stress, and finding three dramatically different vineyards. The soil here is seemingly small swales and undulations can be critical to wind exposure and drainage. It was amazing, when I first came down here with Cornell researchers,” relates Perrine, “to walk a row and find three dramatically different vineyards. The soil here is not a very deep phenomenon. Over time, as the glaciers receded, thin, shaly layers of glacial moraine were often washed away. This explains, as Perrine’s colleague, Christophe Tray, relates, “3 ft [0.94 m] in elevation can make for five different days, picking and three different tranches. We’re not sure at that it’s better at

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Chardonnay is still ubiquitous, but one senses a mounting concern among growers that this variety’s days of pre-eminence are numbered. Many vintners are reducing or removing the barrels from their Chardonnay programs.

Sauvignon—represented that region’s destiny. But such a comparison might be hasty when one considers the range of varieties with which Long Island vintners are making deliciously distinct wines. Whether you would not consider paring down his eight-variety list, Charles Massoud of Paumanok endorses the前述评论者的大胆预言, suggesting that Syrah could also become a Long Island star, at least in the warmest vineyards around Riverhead. Schneider had been specializing in Cabernet Franc for well over a decade from what was then the westernmost vineyard and on Long Island when he came to bottle his first Syrah, from purchased fruit of the 2000 vintage. It is not the robust, deep, red, full-bodied, dark-fruited "classics" in 2004. The meats, brin, herbal, peppery, and red-fruited results of early bottlings from these vines are highly distinctive and satisfying—not surprisingly bearing a stronger resemblance to "Northern Rhônes (particularly certain St-Josephs) than they do to any of the world’s other Syrahs. Clearly, today’s vintners are discovering a Long Island wine community still in the phase of developing their own regional signature, as reason I’m here”—as opposed to, say, his native California—"is that we’re helping to define a region. It just wasn’t with young vines, a lot of our vines are now 20-25 years old. But we’re still finding out what our own vineyards are capable of growing at.

Asking about important recent changes among Long Island’s growers, regional pioneer Louise Hargrave pointed to thedocs, incalculable contributions to the world of wine, and if their potential is not now being realized, it will be, in the future. Barbara Shinn aptly illustrates the pains that must be taken here to achieve satisfying ripeness.

Vineyards to achieve satisfying ripeness.

Shinn, and Merlot would not know today which variety to discontinue." For some years after founding Dominus, for example, Christian Moueix harbored serious doubts about the authenticity of his Cabernet Franc, so Merlot-like did it seem to him from a right bank Bordeaux perspective. Ultimately, Cabernet Franc could be a showstopper on Long Island. There is in fact growing interest in this variety throughout the northeastern and midwestern United States due to its frost resistance and ability to grow well in cold climates where a sense of curiosity, collaboration, and criticism infect wine regions as well established and revered as the northeastern and midwestern United States due to its frost resistance and ability to grow well in cold climates where a sense of curiosity, collaboration, and criticism infect wine region's. Fortunately, there are fewer than seven acres of Syrah in the area, making it difficult and expensive for even the best athletes to go after a single variety. The meats, brin, herbal, peppery, and red-fruited results of early bottlings from these vines are highly distinctive and satisfying—not surprisingly bearing a stronger resemblance to "Northern Rhônes (particularly certain St-Josephs) than they do to any of the world’s other Syrahs. Clearly, today’s vintners are discovering a Long Island wine community still in the phase of developing their own regional signature, as reason I’m here”—as opposed to, say, his native California—"is that we’re helping to define a region. It just wasn’t with young vines, a lot of our vines are now 20-25 years old. But we’re still finding out what our own vineyards are capable of growing at.

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mainland, with effects so devastating that growers have been forced to invest in netting, which is only partially effective. And the steep rise of what were already some of the highest residential property taxes in the United States would have wipped Long Island’s wine industry in the bud had not Suffolk County pioneered a plan that placed $12,000 an acre under permanent agricultural use. Despite that, and large sales (dating back to the repeal of the Monopoly), are finally being eroded. This means that a lack of national distribution should no longer prevent fair-thinking wine lovers from discovering the unique excellence that the best Long Island growers can offer. With retail prices rarely more than $20 a bottle and sometimes dipping to $10, many of these wines can conservatively be called good value, particularly from a US perspective. But a few growers are even thinking ahead to a time when there could be a small European market for their wines. New York consumers, like the growers and the occasional bunny-obsessed journalist anxious to promote cross-pollination of tastes and ideas, have discovered that Old World palates are charmed and fascinated by Long Island’s vinous bill of fare.

Red and white alike, Long Island’s wines can prove intensely juicy and fruit-driven, yet they are capable of aging to fascinating complexity, characterized by balance and restraint. Tasted at ten years of age, 1995 vintage wines ranging from Paumanok’s Grand Vintage Selection Chardonnay, to Tuthill’s Pier and Sagaponak’s 1995 Old Vines Merlot, all showed delectable depth. Other mature standouts—several of these still available in limited quantities as winery reserve selections—include Jamesport Vineyards’ 1998 Cabernet Franc and Merlot reserve, Lenz’s 1997 Cabernet Franc and Merlot reserve, Lenz’s 1995 Old Vines Merlot and Pellegrini’s 1995 Cabernet Franc and Escore Bordolese Blanc. Taking into consideration the accumulated experience and increased quality-consciousness at all of these wineries—not to mention the emergence of such exceptionally promising but youthful ventures as the Wölffer Estates, the Channing Daughters, and The Grapes of Roth—are responsible for many successes with Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. As Schijf-Bedell’s 2005 crop flourished despite autumn rains of biblical proportions, recently arrived from California young-wine maker John Irving Levenberg has instituted some clever and foresighted approaches in the cellar. He sees Long Island as attempting to position itself between California and Bordeaux in the style of its red blends. Their Gewürztraminer is also fascinating.

The Long Island wine region’s first bed and breakfast opens its doors, as well as one of the region’s finest restaurants. Shinn Estate Vineyards, Mattituck (North Fork)
+1 631 804 0367; www.shinnestatevineyards.com
This recently restored 19th-century mansion includes six bedrooms, as well as one of the region’s finest restaurants.

Shinn Estate Vineyards, Mattituck (North Fork)
+1 631 722 9200; www.jedediahhawkinsinn.com
If you go…
If you are demonstrating the region’s potential for distinctive white wines.

Wölffer Estate, Sagaponak (The Hamptons)
+1 631 727 3334; www.wolferrerestate.com
Bruce Schneider is a Manhattan-based marketing specialist who is interested in the market for fine wines outside of the United States. Schneider’s excellent Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, as well as Bordeaux varieties. The facility here is unusually near to Long Island Sound, and the winery’s customers can enjoy a wide variety of local and international wines, including some of the best wines from the region’s distinctive local cheeses.

The American Hotel, Sag Harbor
+1 631 765 0177; info@northforktableandinn.com
To showcase local ingredients. The desserts are the most stimulating I have enjoyed anywhere in years, and the wine list—while brief and including a strategically chosen quorum of local bottles—is unusual for its international breadth.

The American Hotel, Sag Harbor
+1 631 765 3535; www.theamericanhotel.com

Fifth Season, Greenport
+1 631 477-8500; www.fifthseason.com
Chef-couple Erik Orlovski has a deserved reputation for a menu that showcases local produce and changes weekly.

Scrimsaw, Greenport
+1 631 765 3010; www.scrimsawanrestaurant.com
An innovative restaurant offering Asian-European fusion.

Paumanok Vineyards, Aquebogue (North Fork)
+1 631 722 8800; www.paumanok.com
Lambeth-born Charles Massoud and his southern Pfalz-born wife Ursula have farmed this property since 1982. Huge plantings of Chardonnay, as well as Bordeaux varieties. New plantings, a new facility, and the help of winemaker Juan Micelis Martinez all promise a new level of excellence. Page and chef Shinn are the owners of Manhattan’s Home restaurant and a superb source of culinary and agricultural lore.

Wölffer Estate, Sagaponak (The Hamptons)
+1 631 537 5106; www.wolferrerestate.com
Christian Wolffer, with vineyard manager Richard Piazzano and winemaker Roman Roth, are responsible for many successes with Chardonnay and Pinot Noir as well as Bordeaux varieties. The facility here is unusually near to Long Island Sound, and the winery’s customers can enjoy a wide variety of local and international wines, including some of the best wines from the region’s distinctive local cheeses.

The American Hotel, Sag Harbor
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Open for less than a year, The North Fork Table is run by two couples with impeccable culinary credentials. Gerard Hirson and chef Gaëlle Fleming are Mike and Mary Mraz. The cuisine is stunning in its inventiveness and ability to show off local ingredients. The desserts are the most stimulating I have enjoyed anywhere in years, and the wine list—while brief and including a strategically chosen quorum of local bottles—is unusual for its international breadth.

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