

## ON THE VINE

# AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE

*Long Island's oldest family-owned winery keeps it real.*

BY AMY ZAVATTO



Photographs: Nick Hall

PECONIC—Drive along Route 25 or the Northville Turnpike and you'll be hard-pressed not to notice what feels like the constant east-to-west presence of Pindar vineyards, their pretty, Picasso-like scrawl of a logo a frequent black-on-white symbol on the landscape. To a North Fork newbie, or even to those of us who remember when Pindar first put down vines back in 1979, it makes one start to wonder, eerily, if the winery is more akin to a shareholder in the corporation known as North Fork Wine Country. After all, they seem to be everywhere. Peconic, Southold, Jamesport, and Cutchogue. Town upon town of vineyards owned by the winery named for a 4th-century Greek poet. Certainly, with so much money from non-agricultural sectors being invested into Long Island wine, it's not an odd urge to want to draw that conclusion.

But it would be an incorrect one.

Dr. Herodotus "Dan" Damianos—or Dr. Dan as the internist is often referred to—didn't start out in life thinking he'd put all his eggs in one basket. Or, more accurately, leave them to hatch

**All in the family.** Dr. Herodotus "Dan" Damianos, center, with his sons, from left, Pindar, Alexander, and Jason.

in a fallow potato field. But it is what he did. For a kid born in Hell's Kitchen and raised on Jerome Avenue in the Bronx, eastern Long Island must have seemed like a world away; but then again, so did the notion of owning a winery. He went to school to be a teacher, and while earning his masters in education from New York University, was drafted into the Korean War. He finished when he got back, heading to Columbia to get his PhD, but part way through found his calling for medicine. In 1956 he headed to Bologna, Italy, to get his degree in medicine. It was there that he gained a whole new appreciation for wine.

But it really started when the young doctor stumbled upon a bunch of old vines in 1966. "When I first came out to Long Island to Stony Brook, I purchased a home that was on the harbor that hadn't been lived in for approximately 25 or 30 years, and there

were a few old grape arbors there. They looked like the size of trees!” he remembers of those gnarly, old Niagara vines in his backyard. He left them there as he cleaned up the property and fixed up the house for his young family. As the days grew warmer, the vines began to bear fruit. There was so much of it, the physician decided to try his hand at playing winemaker, and made use of what was there. He experimented with making a little vino and helped his kids make jams and jellies for the fun of it.

“I had a few patients of mine who’d become friends, and they signed me up for the Long Island Farm Bureau,” he says, “and so I started getting all these interesting reports about agriculture. At one point in 1967 or 68, it was reported that the golden nematode had infected the Long Island potato fields, and it was spreading all over. At the time I think it was 80,000 acres of potato farms. So the farmers called Cornell and they came down to see what they could do about it.”

Nothing, was the answer. The farms needed to sit fallow for about three years before they could be replanted with potatoes again. Meanwhile, Cornell recommended that the farms be planted with other crops that wouldn’t be susceptible to the nematode. Some intrepid farmers, including the Hargraves (now iconic personalities in Long Island wine lore) noticed that the eastern Long Island climate was similar to that of other maritime wine regions and experimented growing *Vitis vinifera* varietals of grapes. (The Hargraves knew that the Wickham farm family had already dabbled with tables grapes of European vinifera varieties. Damianos, however, wasn’t far behind.

“I got very interested in the potential

of it, especially with my little tiny vineyard on my property [in Stony Brook],” says Damianos. He bought his first 30 acres, which sit behind the tasting room on Route 25 in Peconic, in 1979, and named his vineyard after his youngest son, Pindar (now the vineyard manager for all 600 acres). In 1980, he planted four or five more acres, which his sons Alexander, who now runs Duck Walk, and Jason, winemaker for both Pindar and Duck Walk and proprietor of his own namesake 20-acre vineyard, would spend their weekends weeding. In 1981, he planted about 25 more. “Subsequently, every year, I made sure I planted another 5 or 10 acres and acquired more farmland realizing that eventually it was going to become very expensive,” Damianos says. “I wanted to make sure we had enough property as the vineyard business expanded and as the wineries became more popular.”

Of course, in those early days, expansion was the least of their problems. Getting past the *Horton Hear’s a Who* stumbling block of being a Long Island winery (“We’re here! We’re here!”) led the Damianoses to get creative in their marketing. He bought ad space on buses and on the local WALK radio station. He pounded the pavement himself, bringing his wine to shops and restaurants in western Suffolk and Nassau to introduce them to the notion of a locally grown product. “It was a question of educating people,” Damianos says. “In the early 1980s, the more west you went, the less they knew [about Long Island wine]. So I’d go in and say, ‘Give it a whirl! Give it a try!’ They often didn’t know where to put us in the liquor store since most weren’t carrying any New York State wines. I’d say, ‘Just put us up front!’” he laughs.

Even before the winery was in full





swing, Damianos held tours to drum up excitement. “One of things we wanted to do was have people aware that vineyards are being planted here, so we had a lot of tours. We put up big signs and invited people out. Back in ‘81, we planted some table grapes, and on Labor Day weekend we opened a farm stand and sold them in baskets. If you saw a star at the bottom of your basket, we told you to bring it back next year and you’d get a free bottle of wine. We’d say, ‘See that there? It’s going to be a winery.’”

And then there was the biggest issue: figuring out how to grow and make good wine. With only a few young Turks turning potato fields into vineyards back then, there was nobody to turn to for advice. “We were left to our own devices,” he recalls, “and boy, did we make mistakes. I consulted Cornell upstate to figure out what kind of vine training system I should use, and they suggested an inappropriate one. I tried consulting some folks in California and they wouldn’t even talk to us. But after time and experience, we all developed the knowledge. Those who came after certainly benefited significantly by what we had gone through initially. Now anyone coming out has a template for how to start a vineyard out here.”

Pindar has been the training ground for many who currently work for other Long Island wineries. This is an important factor often overlooked when some in the wine business and wine press criticize Pindar’s size and breadth of production (more than 60,000 cases a year—large by Long Island standards, but on the small side for places like Napa). Unlike some of the smaller, boutique wineries on the North Fork who concentrate their efforts on a few noble varietals, Pindar goes beyond the usual suspects, and works with grapes like gamay, viognier, malbec, riesling, and is even experimenting with a tiny patch of tempranillo. The grapes are mostly machine-harvested, with the exception of Mythology, their shining-star red Bordeaux blend, which is hand-harvested and has the highest price tag at \$30 a bottle.

Pindar makes a lot of wine in varying styles and price points. The winery currently makes over 20 different wines—although, among Long Island’s 30-plus wineries, they are certainly not alone in this approach. It is important to Damianos to have a price range that, by its affordability, invites people to become wine lovers and brings them into the fold. “It’s important to me to be able to produce a wonderful wine at a very reasonable price. It would be nice if you could get a great chardonnay for under \$10—that’s what we strive for. We have our high-end, but we like to produce wines that people

can drink every day. You’re not going to open a \$60 cab every night unless you’re a billionaire.”

They have also been held to the coals a bit for including in their portfolio some sweet table wines, although Dr. Dan is proud to point out that he was the first to experiment with ice wine on Long Island. And lately, bottles like their late-harvest 2006 chardonnay show an interesting side on a local varietal that has done well here historically. It is rich, concentrated, and fills your nostrils with the delightful, heady aromas of mango and ripe apple.

But the Damianoses take it all in stride. They don’t seem to feel they have much to prove after nearly 40 years building the winery from the ground up, although the second generation isn’t resting on their laurels.

As for the sons, Alexander earned two MBA’s and manages Duck Walk, as well as handling much of the business end of the two wineries; Jason headed to the University of California at Fresno for a degree in enology and viticulture and spent three years studying in Bordeaux before taking the reigns as head winemaker; Pindar studied agronomy upstate at Cobleskill and followed in Jason’s footsteps, earning his undergraduate degree in enology and viticulture as well, and now spends his days walking the fields as vineyard manager and looking for ways to green the business, like the 60 acres he’s using as a testing ground for natural compost, and shunning fertilizers or herbicides. They also have their own Pindar wine store in Port Jefferson and a new state-of-the-art winery on the parcel of land next to the main tasting room.

As for the patriarch, the years of doing rounds at multiple hospitals and then dashing out to eastern Long Island with the kids are long gone. These days, the good doctor spends weekends giving tours of the winery, and doing his favorite thing: educating. With the intensity and storytelling abilities of any good teacher, he leads his flock into the vineyards, the winery, the tasting room, so that by the time they put glass to lips, they understand how the wine got there.

“The thing I’m most proud of, and I’ve said it to the kids, is that when I leave this planet I really feel like I’ve accomplished something. Way back when, I felt like a pioneer. I was part of this new industry out here. And I’m very proud of the fact that when it started there were only a few of us. A lot of them left and I’m still here. If we hadn’t been successful, maybe they wouldn’t have either.” 🍷