

## ON THE VINE

# A WINERY THAT SPARKLES

*A couple's passion for bubbly helps expand Long Island's portfolio.*

BY CHRISTIAN TROY



SOUTHOLD—Tom and Cynthia Rosicki are the owners of Rosicki & Rosicki, a law firm based in Nassau County, and they are also husband and wife. Tom met Cynthia 20 years ago at a debutante ball in Manhattan. At the time neither was truly into wine, but their first date involved a bottle of Veuve Clicquot and a passion that embraced life, love and sparkling wine ensued. Nine weeks later they were married and were sailing the Chesapeake Bay enjoying assorted bottles of Dom Perignon, Cristal and La Grande Dame as daily treats. The dual love affairs would continue as the Rosickis, who have owned homes on the North Fork for the past 10 years, sampled the bubbly of Pugliese and Osprey's Dominion. And, naturally, the business-savvy couple began to wonder if they could add anything to the blossoming Long Island wine industry.

So it was fortuitous that, in 2002, while the Rosickis ate breakfast in a local diner, Steve Mudd, one of Long Island's top vineyard managers, walked in. Mudd and Tom had talked before about the

Rosickis' entry into the Long Island wine scene, so a conversation was soon struck up. "He basically took out a napkin and drew a picture of the two forks," recalled Tom of the conversation with Mudd. "He said 'Take a look at the North Fork. There's not a lot of land and it's all getting bought up. You gotta act now.' And the next day we went vineyard shopping."

But there was no luck to be had that day, so they lamented by heading over to a local wine shop to buy a bottle of Champagne for the evening. While tasting a new sparkling wine with the owner, the salesman who actually sold the shop that new sparkler happened to walk in. A good conversation amongst like-minded peers was struck up. The Rosickis spoke of their real estate frustrations, and then the salesman, "Champagne George," as Tom Rosicki refers to him, said his brother-in-law was selling his 12-acre nursery. The Rosickis left immediately and headed straight to the nursery. They toured the property, negotiated a price and left a deposit that

same day. No business plans. No timelines. Just pure serendipity. The Rosickis were going to own a vineyard.

The first step the Rosickis took was tapping Mudd, the person who had inspired their land grab, who also happens to be one of the best grape-growers on all of Long Island (and it doesn't hurt that Mudd happens to be the project's neighbor in Southold).

And the first thing Mudd did was to tap them right back. As Tom says, "Steve turns to me and says, 'So now you've got the vineyard what do you want to make?' And I didn't know. So, he says, 'Well, what do you like to drink?' and that was easy. Sparkling wine. We love sparkling wine." Mudd referred them to who would turn out to be the perfect winemaker: Gilles Martin.

As a salesperson for an international wine house, I was intrigued to learn the Rosickis' story. The relatively small selection of Long Island sparklers results partly from the realities of making wine with bubbles. The *méthode champenoise* or natural method is a tedious and costly process. As if it weren't challenging enough to ferment pressed grape juice into a delicious beverage, a winemaker attempting a sparkling wine must essentially create two wines, transferring the first wine from barrels or tanks into bottles to ferment a second time when the bubbles are born. All of this biological activity generates not only bubbles, but also sediment that must be removed by a painstaking and ingenious process known as "racking" or "riddling." A winemaker might handle each bottle 100 times, first rotating the bottle on its side and gradually turning it upside down to gather the yeasty sediment in the tip. The tip is dipped into an icy bath to create a small, yeast-containing ice cube that can be popped out without disturbing the rest of the bottle's contents or allowing the bubbles to escape. The wine is corked, and the process of aging begins. All of these steps mean more opportunities to make errors and bad Champagne. It also takes several times the acreage of grapevines to make a bottle of sparkling wine as a bottle of still wine, since grapes intended for Champagne are harvested early, when their sugar content is still low, because the long fermentation process would make fully ripe grapes too alcoholic.

But when done right, the generated result can be breathtaking, and it goes without saying that the great Champagnes and sparkling wines of the world are regarded as some of the best wines in the world overall. Not only are they delicious and intellectual, but they are also probably the best food wines to pair pretty much anything with. Oysters or simple sashimi. Or even a beautiful

aged filet mignon. The great sparklers carry power, definition, and that "other" thing that makes them truly flexible.

As the Long Island wine industry continues to broaden its scope of wines, it makes sense that eventually someone would come along and pursue a driven effort at making a world-class sparkling wine program. But to do this the Rosickis needed a man like Martin.

Martin is French, born and raised just outside of the appellation of Champagne. He grew up drinking Champagne. He has studied in Champagne, and he has worked in Champagne, including stints at Roederer assisting with their *tête-de-cuvée*, bottling Cristal. He is known on Long Island for his work with Martha Clara and Sherwood House. But with Sparkling Pointe, here was an opportunity to return to his roots and build the wines from the very first planting. It was a project he had to be involved in; the opportunity to solely focus on the wine of his heritage.

Martin worked with Mudd to plant five acres of chardonnay to Dijon clones, and five acres predominantly to Pommard clones of pinot noir. The Dijon clones were chosen for their ripeness and the Pommard's for their richness and depth. "Here we are on the eastern section of the North Fork and the terroir is about the exposition and the proximity to the water," says Martin. "It's much warmer here than in Champagne, but the coolness of this side of the North Fork is very important." Martin went on to add that the cool, coastal climate of the eastern North Fork carries a similarity to the cool growing season of Champagne. It helps to preserve acidity; and this builds structure in the wines. Mudd and Martin planted the vineyard in 2003, and it produced its first working harvest in 2007. In keeping with Martin's winemaking roots, and following the model of a class Champagne house, Sparkling Pointe will combine the two main Champagne grapes—pinot noir and chardonnay—in varied ratios to offer a suite of five wines that each brings the drinker different texture, aroma and bubbly experience. Soon to come are a non-vintage brut, a vintage brut, a vintage rosé (to be named Topaz Imperial), a blanc-de-blanc (100 percent chardonnay *cuvée*), and a *tête-de-cuvée* (or top reserve).

To be well-made, sparkling wine must sit like a great stew and age, develop and compose itself. So, in order for Martin to release Sparkling Pointe wines this year, he has been sourcing fruit from Sherwood House and Russel McCall from the 2004, 2005 and 2006 vintages. As the Rosickis are still finishing the Sparkling Pointe winery, the current Sparkling Pointe releases were made at the Premium Wine Group facility. Martin says that before the

Summer of 2008 Sparkling Pointe will be releasing the 2004 Vintage Brut and the 2004 “Topaz Imperiale” Brut Rosé.

I found the winery’s Topaz Imperiale Brut Rosé 2004 quite good. This blend of 40 percent pinot noir, 60 percent chardonnay, with a small amount of still pinot noir for color, is clearly rosé. The overall structure is tight and wound with good effervescence, and the wine can be aged from three to five years I would estimate. The dry pinot noir adds undertones of fruit, cherry or apricot, even a lingering, almost smoked salmon—yes, smoked salmon—note. Martin adds that this is rosé “designed for food.”

The Sparkling Pointe Vintage Brut 2004 was a completely different thing, even though it included nearly the same ratio of the two main Champagne grapes. A screamingly perfect ripe-apple flavor immediately hit my palate, and it morphed into Meyer lemon skin and apple hard candy, and then into floating lemon custard. This wasn’t a yeasty sparkler, and I quite liked the solid effervescence as the bubbles added an even higher “zippiness” to the palate. Overall, the wine is definitely defined as being very clean and composed throughout the mouth. I would estimate ageability to be two to four years, but 20 years from now Martin will probably pull a bottle for me and it will be mesmerizing?

“We are not Champagne,” Martin adds. “We are the North Fork. But we can produce the same quality. The definition of “terroir” is not the same here as you find it in Champagne, as the soils are not the same. But, you give me a Pinot from Cutchogue, from North of here, and from this estate, and I can tell the difference. Ten years from now, I will be able to show you a Sparkling Pointe wine and it will be unique.”

And this vision, that the East End can produce very good sparkling wine, has won the Rosickis’ trust. “Up until the tasting last fall, we were checking in, but that was it,” says Tom. “We showed up to taste our first wine and we looked at each other and said, ‘This is good stuff.’” No small comment coming from people who have drunk their share of top Champagnes over the years.

“This is the first time anyone has ever done this,” adds Cynthia Rosicki. Tom continues that the goal is to make the highest-quality sparkling wines, but to also have fun. Consider another of the Rosickis’ passions—Brazil, a country they visit four to five times a year. They have commissioned Brazilian artist Claudio Paciuolo to design Sparkling Pointe’s label. And they have already lined up accounts at hotels and top restaurants in Rio de Janeiro. To put it simply, Tom threw up his hands, laughed and said, “If we made a



**Bubbly guy.** “We are not Champagne, but we can produce the same quality,” says Sparkling Pointe winemaker Gilles Martin.

nickel or lost a nickel it wouldn’t matter to me because I can say that our wine is sold in Rio. And that makes this my greatest accomplishment to date.”

The Rosickis have definitely brought that passion and energy to make this a truly unique project on the Long Island wine scene. They have brought one of the best possible grower-winemaker teams on the North Fork together and the physical foundations have been laid. Like all groundbreaking ventures there will no doubt be a certain level of experimentation in the early years. But I can say that I came away feeling as though both the Rosickis and Martin were deeply passionate about this project and are driven to make defining wines for Long Island. The first wines will showcase the “house style” of Sparkling Pointe as they come from purchased grapes. It will be very interesting to follow them from 2009 forward to see how they evolve their project, as the wines will finally be composed of estate grown fruit. No doubt, these estate wines will equally share a sense of joie de vivre, heritage and fun as the current releases do. ☺

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