
CULT OF TASTE

AMBITIOUS POUR

Bedell thinks big about Long Island wine.

BY ZACHARY LAZAR



CUTCHOQUE—Ever since I met my wife, a North Fork native, I have been hearing about the hopes that eastern Long Island would become a major producer of world class wines. With a climate similar to Bordeaux's, the region could make wines with distinctive, complex flavors and at the same time maintain its rural character in the face of encroaching suburban sprawl. Potato farms would become vineyards, while wine-tasters from the city would begin to think of the North Fork as Napa Valley, only closer. It always sounded like a nice idea, and yet there was the mystery of why it was so hard to find Long Island wines in the liquor stores of Manhattan, just a hundred miles away.

Perhaps no one knows this mystery as well as Trent Preszler of Bedell Cellars. Having written a master's thesis on the challenges of marketing Long Island wines in New York City, Preszler took a job as chief operating officer of Bedell as part of a major revamping of the winery under its new owner, Michael Lynne.

"I saw it as a huge opportunity to put a whole region on the map," said Preszler. Aware that in cities such as Portland and Seattle restaurant menus are dominated by local wines, Preszler hopes to persuade New York restaurants to go local by setting a new standard of excellence at Bedell. By now, you may have heard of the massive investment that Michael Lynne has made towards achieving this goal. Lynne is co-chairman and CEO of New Line Cinema—makers of the "Lord of the Rings" movies—and since purchasing the winery he has upgraded it in virtually every way. State-of-the-art equipment for harvesting, conveying, sorting, and fermenting grapes has been imported from Italy, France and Germany. John Levenberg, whose international wine-

making experience includes prize-winning stints in France, New Zealand and Napa Valley, has been brought in to join founding winemaker Kip Bedell. The tasting room has been expanded and remodeled to accommodate large social functions as well as a portion of Lynne's contemporary art collection. Art world stars such as Eric Fischl and Barbara Kruger have designed labels for Bedell's "Taste" series. The

first of a second art-clad set called "Gallery" bears the image "Falling Bird" by Sagaponack artist Ross Bleckner. (Although Lynne insists that wine and art are "separate interests," he recognizes the intimate connections, and putting desirable artwork on a bottle only heightens the urge to collect. "The creativity and originality that are the essence of art of any kind are also at the heart of making great wines. I was a wine enthusiast and collector for many years and then decided to go one significant step further and purchase a winery.")

It might look at first like that dubious combination of money and flash that is so often connoted by the word "Hamptons," but there seems to be real conviction behind Bedell's transformation. Louisa Hargrave, director of the Stony Brook University Center for Wine, Food and Culture, started the whole Long Island wine industry in the '70s with her husband Alec and their Hargrave Vineyard. She points out that an influx of big-time money to a place like Bedell can lead to experimentation and the freedom to pursue different



Winemaker John Levenberg and COO Trent Preszler want Bedell's wines to attract international attention.

approaches. She's optimistic about what Lynne and his team bring to the region. She praises Bedell's new renovation, for example, because it preserves the feel of a Long Island farmhouse, not detracting from the landscape with something gaudy or ostentatious. Lynne, she says, shows

“a touch of genius” for having this taste and sensitivity to the North Fork’s unique flavor. “It’s a very good thing for the region to have a big financial player with a sense of the region’s character.”

One gets the sense that Lynne aspires to a day when he can order his wine in fine restaurants wherever he finds himself in the world, whether he’s visiting the Guggenheim in Bilbao or the Guggenheim in New York. “We have long-term aspirations to be on the list at top restaurants in major urban markets around the world,” said Preszler. “However, there still is much work to be done convincing New York restaurants to feature wines made in their own backyard.” Said Lynne: “Our intention is to make wines that are truly competitive with the finest wines in the world. I truly believe our vineyards in the North Fork of Long Island are uniquely capable of nurturing intense and flavorful fruit that is the essential ingredient of wonderful wines.”

Making those wines in our climate is now winemaker Levenberg’s challenge. In recent years, both critical and popular taste has leaned towards the fruity, high-alcohol wines produced in the dry Napa Valley. Long Island, on the other hand, is more suited to producing a subtler, Bordeaux style wine—wine that makes a less dramatic first impression but evolves in the glass, layer by layer. But Levenberg speaks with tremendous enthusiasm about the possibilities he sees in bridging the gap between these two different styles. (In perhaps some early evidence, the Corey Creek 2005 Reserve Chardonnay, which sells for \$30 and

fruit-forward aspects of Napa Valley with the elegant structure of Bordeaux. He is able to do this, in part, by drawing on three different vineyard sites—each with slightly different soil and sun exposure—to produce blends of unusual subtlety. Although the winery will continue to make single variety wines, like the award-winning chardonnay, it will increasingly focus on blends, which are gaining favor among consumers.

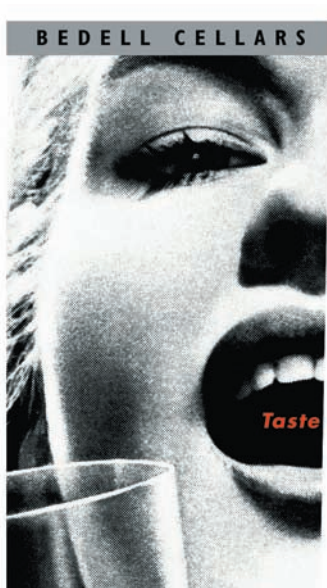
When I asked Levenberg what drew him to Bedell, he spoke of “commitment”—the dedication not only of financial resources but of knowledge and of hands-on effort. In particular, he mentioned the nitty-gritty aspects of winemaking—shoot-thinning, crop-thinning, leafing—which make for healthy vines and better grapes. Bedell’s day-to-day attention to these fundamentals is “world-class,” Levenberg says. Last year, winemakers across the East End faced a difficult, rain-drenched harvest after what had been a stunningly dry summer, perfect for growing grapes. Yet Levenberg expects the results to be excellent. He points out that the vineyard team, led by Dave Thompson, had prepared the vines so well before the storm—opening up the canopy, removing leaves, thinning—that even after the heavy rainstorms the grapes remained in good condition.

I recently tasted five wines in Bedell’s new tasting room, sleek and modern, with lots of black and chrome—something between a Chelsea gallery and a wine bar in Williamsburg. The first wine was a gewürztraminer from Bedell’s partner winery, Corey Creek, a bright

spicy white with a hint of anise. Like the 2005 Bedell Taste White, it was aged in stainless steel, rather than oak, to bring out the fruit and spice of the grapes. The two reds—2004 Taste Red and the 2001 Reserve Merlot—were both aged in French oak and both seem to achieve Levenberg’s goal of mid-palette structure: not the “fruit bombs” of California, but both presenting different flavors with each new sip. The last wine was a 2004 Late Harvest Riesling, its sweetness tinged with apricot.

Will these wines make it onto the lists of New York City’s best restaurants? The wine world is an arcane one,

policed by self-proclaimed experts who in the past have been stingy in their praise of Long Island wines, but this may be about to change. This summer the previously elusive *Wine Advocate* gave kudos not only to Bedell but 15 other East End wineries. This group praise is actually an important key to the success of each of the individual wineries. It is Bedell’s aim to raise the bar for Long Island wine, but there is a sense of cooperative spirit to go along with this ambition. Preszler spoke not of putting Bedell on the map, but of putting the region on the map. He made it clear that “an individual winery can’t benefit unless the whole region gains recognition.” □



Above: Three labels from Bedell’s artist series. From left, Barbara Kruger, Eric Fischl, and Ross Bleckner.

“unfolds in the mouth, reveals seamlessly integrated layers of flavors such as lemon custard, wheat, warm yeasty bread, and honeysuckle,” according to Levenberg, was just named the Best Chardonnay out of hundreds of wines in the 2006 New York Wine & Food Classic.)

California wines were “great for the first year,” Levenberg said, but after that, they often tended to break down because of their high alcohol content. A sojourn in Bordeaux, in 2002, gave Levenberg a taste for wines produced in a cooler climate, “mid-palette” wines with staying power and complexity. At Bedell, Levenberg is working to combine the