
ON THE VINE

BY BRIAN HALWEIL

LORD OF THE GRAPES

The men who planted Long Island wine country.

SOUTHOLD—“This isn’t just Mudd Vineyards,” Steve Mudd declared as he stepped onto the grated steel steps of a construction trailer parked at the northeast corner of his family farm in Southold. “It’s world corporate headquarters.”

Mudd is joking, of course. He’s channeling the handsome combination of sarcasm and bravado that has endeared him to so many in the East End’s farming community (and that has provoked fear in others). But this grandiose declaration isn’t too far off. Mudd Vineyards, the largest and oldest vineyard management operation on the Island, has planted roughly half of the 3,000 acres of grapes on the East End. For many aspiring vineyards, Mudd found the land, prepared the soil, planted the vines, tended them, harvested the grapes, and helped build and staff the winery. Mudd’s clients run from Stony Brook to Orient and include some of

the region’s largest growers with hundreds of acres, as well as millionaire investors who have just discovered they want to own a winery but don’t want to get their hands dirty.

“It’s hard to imagine the North Fork being where it is today without thinking about Steve and his dad and their positive contribution,” said Charles Massoud of Paumanok Winery in Aquebogue. The Mudds were central in forming the Long Island Grape Growers Association, the predecessor to the Long Island Wine Council, and in the early days of Long Island wine country the pioneer vineyards depended on the Mudds to organize collective purchases of vines, equipment and machinery. Many of the region’s top vineyard managers, Sam McCullough of Lenz Winery and Rich Piscano of Roanoke



Vineyards and Wölffer Estates, got their start working for the Mudds.

“He’s operating a big, important business in a small context,” said Louisa Hargrave, director of the Center for Wine, Food and Culture at Stony Brook University. Along with her husband Alec, Hargrave planted the first vineyard on the East End, and became friendly with the Mudds when they planted a vineyard one year later. “I could see him as the CEO of any Fortune 500 corporation.”

Mudd does have the strutting confidence of a corporate titan, except on a hot summer day his uniform is more surfer-style flip-flops and shorts than three-piece suit. With well-swept amber hair and sky blue eyes on a solid farmer frame, he takes occasional drags on a Garcia y Vega Whiff natural cigar, a habit he picked up when he kicked cigarettes. It’s questionable whether someone with less attitude could do this job. On any given day, no single person is more

responsible for the survival of more of the East End’s grape crop than Mudd. His clients’ fields represent tens of millions of dollars of grapes. His no-nonsense calling is the perfect antidote to the flash and fluff that defines so much in the sublime world of wine. Mudd is the farmer at one end of the long chain from grapes on a vine to barrels in the cellar.

THE FIRST ACRE

“I could see it all coming,” said David Mudd, Steve’s father. David grew up on a farm in Missouri and first came to Long Island as a pilot for Eastern Airlines. He was looking for a way to spend more time in
Above: The Mudd men at the home vineyard on County Road 48.

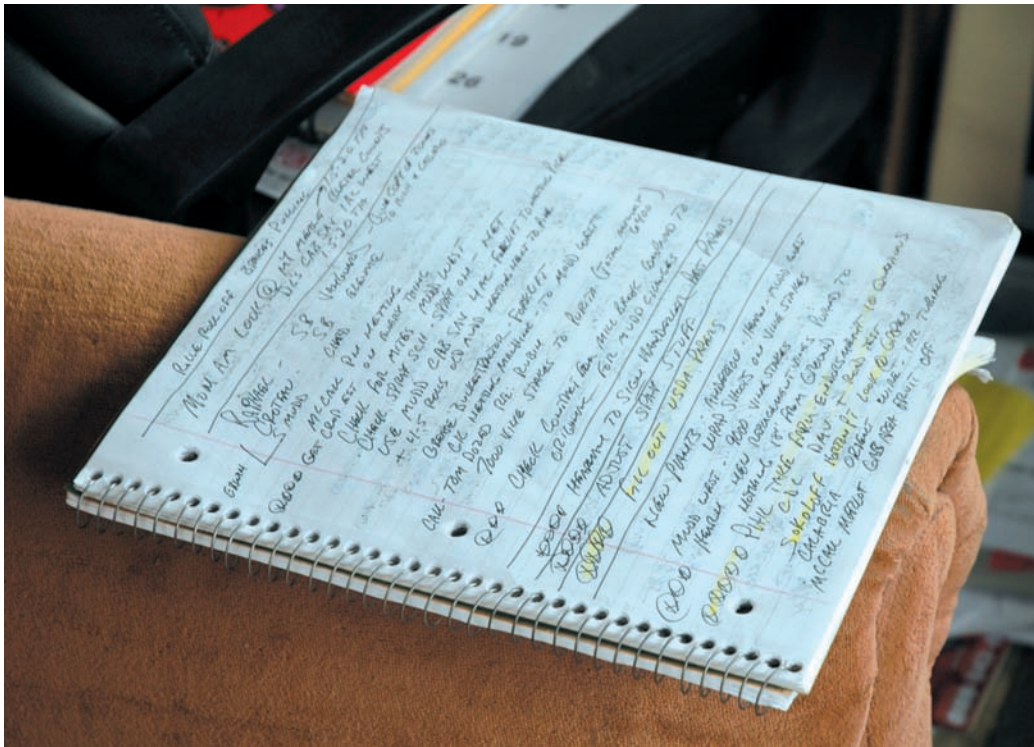
the area and bought a farm in Southold, where he raised potatoes, vegetables, and certified kosher wheat and barley.

In 1974, the Mudds piggybacked on the Hargraves' spring vine order and planted their first acre in sauvignon blanc, chardonnay, gewurtztraminer, merlot and cabernet sauvignon. (Steve still takes cuttings, sometimes as many as 300,000 each fall, from these original vines, which include the oldest merlot and cabernet sauvignon on the Island, to start new vineyards.) The second year, they added four more acres of cabernet sauvignon. By 1976, the entire 23-acre farm was covered in vines.

But the Mudds' true calling didn't become clear until 1979, when Peter Lenz, who had just bought land to start his eponymous winery, stopped by and asked if the Mudds would plant his vineyard. Shortly after, Kip Bedell, a home winemaker who would later found Bedell Cellars, also employed the Mudds' services. A veritable who's-who of early Long Island wine country followed, including Pindar, Paumanok, Palmer, Peconic Bay Vineyards, Pugliese, and Wölffer. (From Washington to Argentina, young wine regions tend to depend on contract planting to rapidly get vineyards up and running.)

Italy, and California's young wine region, eventually developing a close friendship with Amand N. Kasimatis, a grape growing guru at the University of California at Davis. "Everything that I brought back became a percentage of what we applied on the farm," said David, who is mostly retired today but still drives a tractor during crunch times. Part of what he learned was how unique the area's warmth and sun were on the East Coast. "We're just a pencil sitting out in the ocean," Steve explained. "And we're 80 miles from the biggest wine market in the world."

"Most people don't think six months ahead let along 10 years. They want it today and they don't want to wait. My most difficult job is to slow people down. And to get them to realize that we're dealing with a perennial."



Above: One of the four notebooks that Steve Mudd (opposite) uses each year to manage the chaos of 14 clients from Stony Brook to Orient.

"Nearly everyone who got started in this industry, we helped them in some way shape or form," said Steve. "No one has made more mistakes than us. But we're pretty good at making a mistake only once."

David's access to the airlines allowed him to gather information on grape growing—and the growing American interest in drinking wines—from beyond Long Island. He visited vineyards in France,

IT'S A PERENNIAL

"The first question I ask new clients is 'Ten years from now where do you want to be?'" said Steve. It was late August, and he was sitting in a swivel chair in his office as the sun came up. "Most people don't think six months ahead let along 10 years. They want it today and they don't want to wait. My most difficult job is to slow people down. And to get them to realize that we're dealing with a perennial." Mudd doesn't suffer fools gladly and if clients think Mudd's proposal doesn't move fast enough, Mudd's slightly grim response is to ask them how long they think they're going to live: "If you're only going to live six months, then fine. Write me a check, because you won't be around to see the results of poor planning."

He remembers his first meeting with the Petrocelli family which eventually formed Raphael Winery in Cutchogue. The family had already purchased the land when it hired Mudd to plant a vineyard. As he often does when he

approaches a new plot of land, Mudd dug several test holes around the property to assess the state of the soil. He found abominably low levels of organic matter, "the most important component of the soil," since it holds water and nutrients. "You bought a beautiful farm," Mudd told the owners. "But it's tired. It's beat." They considered plowing ahead anyway without improving the soil, but Mudd convinced them otherwise. After two years of planting grasses as cover

crops and plowing them back into the soil, the organic matter had jumped from less than one percent to a respectable 2.75 percent. Mudd planted Raphael's first vines the next year.

Mudd grows the grapes for some of the region's best wines and so clients have come to respect his judgment. And yet there is an unavoidable conflict that comes when an entire region might be blanketed in sticky weather and many vineyards depend on one company to prevent an outbreak of downy mildew or some other devastating grape disease.

Mudd's own attempt to manage this nightmare is best illustrated by the spiral-bound notepad that is like his playbook. The pages are riddled with a cacophony of circled and underlined words, the occasional streak of yellow highlighter, and a code of X's that denote degrees of urgency. One X means priority. Two means big priority. Three or more means drop everything else and get it done. Each day, Mudd adds a new list, crossing out what has been done in previous lists, and prioritizing things that remain. He goes through four notebooks a year. "My brain is like a Rolodex," he said. "I can't get obsessed with things. I need to delegate. I've always got other things to do."

Much of the time that "other thing" is worrying about the weather. An antiquated looking monitor with decidedly non-antiquated radar data, showing rainfall patterns floating across the nation, is the first place Mudd looks in the morning. "It doesn't mean anything until it gets near us," said Mudd, noting that the ocean and sound often deflect even the most predictable thunderstorm. The annual subscription to this weather data costs Mudd more than he'd like to mention, but he won't cancel it any time soon. "If I've got four sprayers going some place, one less spray with four machines pays for this thing," he said. "Spraying is cheap versus losing a part of the crop. I'll tell you repeatedly that they are perennials and you better treat them like one. The fruiting buds for '07 are already on the vine in July of '06. So if you have a lot of disease in July, you're going to feel it next year." Mudd's concern doesn't end when the fruit is harvested, since keeping down disease also helps ensure the year-round health of "the wood"—the gnarled, bark-clad growing vine that must tolerate the winter to bear fruit year after year. "As grape growers on Long Island, we are firefighters," said Mudd. "You are always going to have smoke, but my job is to put the flames out. I can live with the smoke, but I have to put the flames out."

Mudd was the first to recognize that a growing population of starlings on the East End would require bird netting over ripening fruit.



Not long after, he decided to use temporary metal fencing around his vineyards to keep out deer as the harvest approached. When he spotted a groundhog sitting on a pile of wood in his vineyard, he cursed it, and he did the same to a flock of birds that his truck scared out of a row of grapes. For anyone who thinks this attitude is cruel, he said, "Take your annual paycheck and clip it on that wire and hang it out there and see how long you let it hang as they eat away at it."

THE SCENT OF GRAPES

Not surprisingly, Mudd has a certain fondness for the work of tending the Island's grapes. He speaks lovingly of cabernet sauvignon and sauvignon blanc, partly because of the challenge of growing them to full ripeness. He marvels at the "terra"—using the Latin term for land and placing the emphasis on the second syllable—unique to each particular patch of dirt he has worked in Long Island wine country. And he waxes poetic about the unusual experience of being engulfed with elusive grape blossoms. "When the plants bloom, it smells like lilac," said Mudd. "For June and July, the whole place is scented."

Mudd sees the progress of the industry through a broad lens. He said that "our approach to growing has changed about 5000 percent in the last 25 years," and will keep evolving, particularly as a warming climate causes grapes to ripen earlier, a pattern Mudd is tracking closely.

Like any prudent farmer, Mudd is unwilling to make predictions about this year's vintage. "It ain't over 'til it's over," he said, when he spoke the first week of September. "Right now, everything looks unbelievably fantastic. But that's today." He recalls with some melancholy last year's growing season, when he got so optimistic about the crop that he took up a friend on an offer to buy a new truck. Torrential rains a week before harvest ended up destroying nearly half of Mudd's fruit. When the clouds cleared, he called his friend and asked if he could return the truck—another lesson he won't have to learn again. "It's not over until the grapes are in a bin with a cover on top of it," he said. □