

CULT OF TASTE

MERLOT

*Is the region's most common grape
its best foot forward?*

This spring, when the *New York Times* wine tasting panel deigned to review Long Island wines for the first time in the region's 30-year history, it concluded that "more than anything else, there is good merlot."

When *Edible East End's* tasting panel sat down at Gordon's in Amagansett in late August to sample nearly three dozen Long Island merlots, it hoped to build on the *Times'* effort. By the end, branded with purple tongues, lips and teeth, the three panelists—a wine merchant, a chef, and a former winemaker, all with deep roots in East End wine country—seemed undaunted. Here was their bottom line: The wines were all respectable, many were impressive, and the top picks could stand with top merlots from around the globe. Amidst the *Sideways*-inspired backlash against California merlot, East End winemakers can offer merlot lovers something very different and very good: a refreshing, substantive wine that pairs nicely with an array of foods.

Merlot has been a sensitive topic on Long Island, partly because it is so widely planted. In 1989, the young Long Island Wine Council decided to promote merlot as the region's best foot forward. Last year, several vineyards formed the East End Merlot Alliance in an effort to promote merlot as the Island's premier grape. Vocal dissenters feared that such a campaign might pigeonhole the region and ignore the spectacular cabernets, pinot noirs, and assorted white wines that are being bottled.

Today, merlot grapes occupy about 35 percent of the region's 3,000 acres of vines, and nearly every winery makes merlot. The 33 merlots submitted by 23 wineries varied in price from \$13 to \$55, and in vintage from 2000 to 2003—ranges that make direct comparisons challenging. To make things more manageable, the panel tasted the wines by vintage, deciding to use growing conditions in one particular year as a constant. Because several vineyards sent along two wines—often a higher-priced reserve merlot and a more affordable alternative—the panel also grouped the lower-priced options in a separate category. (For instance, Lieb Cellar's 2002 merlot reserve, which sells for \$24, cannot be fairly compared to its \$13 Bridge Lane merlot.) For each vintage, the panelists agreed on the top two wines, and then tasted these top wines again in a final "best of the tasting" group.

The panelists agreed that the 2000 and 2001 vintages were stronger than more recent years, which may need more time to age. (The Channing Daughters Sculpture Garden Merlot stood out in the thin 2003 category, inspiring comments like "Yummy, clear bright notes, like clinging bells.") But, the tating reinforced the general consensus of wine critics that the East End does merlot well. "How could you say this is a white wine regional when you taste these wines?" Louisa Hargrave said midway through the tasting. Mrs. Hargrave and her husband Alex planted the first merlot vines on Long Island in 1974.

2000 VINTAGE

Laurel Lake 2000 Merlot (\$15.99)

Nose is blackberry and slight cinnamon. Tannins are aggressive on the palate.

Castello di Borghese 2000 Reserve Merlot (\$28)

Delicate berry aromas and flavors. Soft on the palate.

Ternhaven 2000 Merlot (\$14.99)

Nose balances acidity with subtle oak and blackcurrant. Big, spicy, and round flavors. An elegant wine.

Lenz 2000 Old Vines Merlot (\$55)

An earthy aroma with bright plum flavors. Good texture. Well-interpreted.

Martha Clara 2000 Estate Reserve (\$23.99)

Lovely, black raspberry aroma. Concentrated plum, tobacco and sage flavors. Nice, soft, slightly bitter finish. Amazing balance. Drink now, drink later.

Roanoke 2000 Merlot (\$38)

Spicy aroma. Leathery, tobacco flavor, with hints of herb and earth. Lacks fruit, but lovely.

The Old Field 2000 Merlot (\$16.00)

Raspberry aroma with a little spice on the palate. Balanced but undistinguished.

2001 VINTAGE

Jamesport 2001 Reserve Merlot (\$29.95)

Big, bright, delicious, jammy, spicy. Hints of black cherry and violet.

Peconic Bay 2001 Merlot (\$23.99)

Soft finish with a mint berry aroma and red fruit flavors. Might be a great wine with a little more time.

Paumanok 2001 Grand Vintage (\$28.99)

The nose is earthy, and the flavors are a nice balance of mild oak and raspberry and other red fruits.



Like other pioneers, they knew the East End's climate and soil are most similar to that of Bordeaux, another maritime area dominated by merlot.

"Put the best three wines from this tasting in a line-up and critics anywhere will fall in love with them," said Michael Cinque, owner of Amagansett Wine & Spirits. In fact, in international competition, the better vintages of Long Island merlot—1985, 1993, 1995, 1997, 2000 and 2001—have stood up with the best merlots from France, California, and elsewhere. "I remember the old, ripping days of green merlot, when it was overcropped, underripened, and harvested early here," he said "It didn't have the chocolaty black fruit that it has now."

Winemakers with significant merlot acreage agree. "I've been here



Raphael 2001 First Label Merlot (\$30)

Spice and berry aromas that carry through in the flavor with hints of oak and nice acidity.

Sherwood House 2001 Estate Grown Merlot (\$24)

Earthy aromas become delicious, deep fruity flavors with hints of plum. Well-interpreted, bright, lively.

Macari 2001 Reserve Merlot (\$25.99)

Nice, big fruit with hints of black cherry. Soft balanced tannins and a rich, chocolaty finish.

Bedell 2001 Reserve Merlot (\$30)

Black raspberry fruit on the nose and tongue. Light texture with slatey finish. Pretty wine.

2002 VINTAGE

Wolffer 2002 Reserve Merlot (\$22)

Berry fruit aromas with woody, almost brambly, flavor.

Broadfields Wine Cellars 2002 Merlot (\$24)

Cherry, spice and violet aromas. Slightly tannic, smoky finish.

Shinn 6 Barrel Reserve (\$34)

Nice cherry aromas with good burst of fruit flavors. Good intensity with hints of olives and plum.

Macari Unfiltered Estate Merlot (\$14.99)

Nice body with lots of wood and mint flavors.

Lieb 2002 Merlot Reserve (\$24)

Woody toasted almond aromas. Simple, round flavors with a good concentration of black currant.

48 Vineyard 2002 Merlot (\$20)

Concentrated mint and fruit aromas mingle well with acidity.

Comtesse Therese Traditional Merlot (\$18)

Bright, minty aromas with a slightly edgy flavor.



for 18 years now, and it's like a workhorse," said Eric Fry, winemaker at Lenz in Peconic, noting that merlot ripens earlier and more consistently in our cool climate than cabernet sauvignon or cabernet franc. Long Island may also have the oldest merlots in the country, with many fields of vines that are more than two decades old, which yield grapes with more depth and structure. (Most California vineyards were replanted in the 1990s due to a pest outbreak.)

"It survived the process of viticultural evolution," said Richard Olsen-Harbich, who has been dealing with East End merlot since 1980. Today, he is the managing director and winemaker at Raphael in Peconic, which focuses primarily on merlot. He noted that the

warm days and cool nights of the East End climate allow "the natural expression of black raspberry, briary cassis and somewhat of a chocolaty, eucalyptus, minty tone." In contrast, heat-oppressed California vintners often have to use water, artificial tannins and other additives to get the balance of sugar, acidity, and alcohol levels that comes naturally on the East End.

All of this puts the Long Island on track to become the premier merlot region in the nation. "What makes a great merlot is what I call the denial of satiety," said Mrs. Hargrave, who directs the Food, Wine, and Culture Center at Stony Brook University. "You don't feel like you've had enough. You're still curious, because there are elements you can't quite identify and the wine evolves over the course of a meal." Mrs. Hargrave compared Long Island merlots to meeting a shy person at a party and, with a bit of time, finding out they are fascinating. In contrast, a big-flavored California merlot with little under the surface would be like meeting a buxom blond, explained Mrs. Hargrave, who has blond hair. Noting the amazing range of flavors at the tasting, Mr. Cinque quipped, "It's the same apple, but, man, do they bake it differently."

Which isn't to say that the region should only produce merlot, the panelists agreed. Tasting rooms have a powerful financial incentive to offer visitors an array of wines, including both traditional varietals and creative blends. And the relatively small, and seemingly monotonous, East End landscape holds enough microclimates—hot spots near Riverhead, cool fields in Bridgehampton—to make much more than merlot.

"It's difficult to get a perspective on these wines without drinking a couple of glasses with something to eat," said John Ross, who was among the first restaurateurs to feature Long Island wines and is now executive chef at Old Vine Golf Club in Riverhead. Almost on cue, as the panelists wrapped up, George Polychronopoulos, owner and chef at Gordon's, produced two heaping servings of mignonette of beef with Bordelais sauce made with Long Island merlot. A chorus of "yes" confirmed that merlots generally go best with roasted, smoky meats (in this case accompanied by wild rice and cream of spinach). "Duck, lamb, duck, lamb," Mrs. Hargrave chanted. Mr. Ross suggested "cedar-plank salmon cooked on the grill with untreated, third grade cedar shingles from Penny hardware." He added: "That little bit of a smoky element works especially well with the berry flavors, lively acidity, and balanced structure of merlots." Think Thanksgiving turkey, holiday goose, pheasant or any local game.

When the bottles were removed from their paper bags, shouts of "woah" and "wow" indicated the general surprise. Shinn Estate Vineyards' 2002 Six Barrel Merlot (\$34), Martha Clara's 2000 Estate Reserve Merlot (\$23.99), and Jamesport's 2001 Reserve Merlot (\$29.95) were the top three choices, in that order. Many of the old guard wineries that have received awards for their merlots didn't make the cut, which is perhaps a testament to how deep the pool of East End merlot has become. Shaking her head, Mrs. Hargrave said, "It's a brave new world." □