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## ON THE VINE

BY BRIAN HALWEIL



### PASSING THE BOTTLE

*The Next Generation in Long Island Wine Country*



AQUEBOGUE—"Are you familiar with chaos theory?," Kareem Massoud asked with an incipient smile. He stood in front of a Rube Goldberg-esque contraption, complete with rubber rollers, plastic tubes, and pneumatic pistons. At one end of the machine, the GAI eight-bottle filler, 12 empty wine bottles clank down; the bottles shuffle along a conveyor belt, where

they are washed, injected with a bit of carbon dioxide (to displace air), and filled with wine; a cork is wedged into the mouth of the bottle, which is then wrapped in plastic; a label is centered on the bottle; and 12 bottles are loaded into a case. "If anything can go wrong, it will go wrong," Mr. Massoud said. "And there is a lot that can go wrong on the bottling line."

Let's say a valve on the bottle-washer breaks. Water begins to spray everywhere, which isn't necessarily a problem, except that it gets the outside of the bottles wet, which means that the labels don't stick as well, which means bottles could arrive at a wine shop or restaurant looking less than perfect. And anything that stops the line costs money. "We are bottling one and a half cases per minute," Mr. Massoud said, scanning the line for any imminent threat. "Every time I have to replace a valve it takes 10 minutes."

That's just what could happen after he's finished making the wine. Before that Mr. Massoud contended with hail storms, deer damage, and starlings so audacious that they ate green, unripe grapes (despite elaborate fencing and the occasional shotgun blast). He's got four more wines to bottle before departing for a work trip to New Zealand in just a few days, and his visa still hasn't come through. One of those wines, his steel-barrel fermented chardonnay, stopped, well, fermenting.

All in a days work for Mr. Massoud at his family's Paumanok Vineyards near Riverhead. He is one of a handful of young vintners who form the second generation of Long Island's maturing wine country. "We do everything here. Soup to nuts," said the 32-year-old winemaker, who joined the business full time after a Jerry Maguire-esque departure from Wall Street seven years ago. "I grow grapes, make wine, sell it, do the website, and take out the garbage."

This level of control over everyday activities is part of the reason that Paumanok was named the New York Food and Wine Classic Winery of the Year in 2004. All of Paumanok's wines are bottled at the vineyard and use only their own fruit. The winery produces less than 8,000 cases each year. "Quality is the only way for a small

Photographs: Brian Halweil and courtesy of the Massoud family.



vineyard to be competitive," he said.

One of the pioneering families of Long Island wine country, the first vintage made by the Massouds actually came out of a bathtub in Kuwait, where Kareem's parents, Charles and Ursula, were living in the 1970s. Like so many other wine-craving expatriates in a Muslim nation, Mr. and Mrs. Massoud purchased grape juice, sugar, and yeast and fermented their own. (Mrs. Massoud's family were winemakers in Germany.)

After moving back to the United States, Charles and Ursula bought a potato farm, and began planting grape vines. Two years later, in 1985, the family harvested its first crop and made its first vintage, using an antique press and grape crusher that are now both displayed under a riot of ferns in the tasting room.

"Of course, we didn't have the same palette and experience as today," the younger Mr. Massoud said of this first wine, grown, harvested, and made exclusively by the family, and shared only with close friends. "But it was good," he admitted. "With wine, sometimes it has nothing to do with the wine. It has everything to do with setting, circumstances, and the people."

Clearly, these early experiences left an impression. Even after leaving for college, Mr. Massoud imagined coming back to the

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vineyard. But when, in his junior year of college, Mr. Massoud told his parents he wanted to work at the vineyard after graduation, they resisted. "They said, 'Do your own thing,'" he remembered. "And they paid for college not so I would come back to the farm."

So, Mr. Massoud ended up at Wharton business school and then on Wall Street for two years. Along with his two younger brothers, Salim and Nabeel, Mr. Massoud still returned to the vineyard during school vacations or on weekends. As the vineyard's plantings expanded from 14 acres to 60 acres, and as business at the tasting room grew in step, there seemed to be room for the children back on the farm. "I always loved the whole idea of having a winery," he said. "If nothing else, it's our own business. Our family business."

Like many other second-generation vintners, Mr. Massoud has no formal training in enology (wine-making) or viticulture (grape-growing), but has learned on the job from his father, who, Kareem made sure to emphasize, is still the winemaker. Kareem has also worked as a cellar-hand at wineries in Chile, South Africa, and Germany, and New Zealand.

Despite his business background, Mr. Massoud enjoys the challenge of the artform more than anything. "There are so many different variables that you have to play with to get the end result," he said, standing in front of a rainbow of half empty wine bottles with esoteric labels—A1, B1, C1 for Aquebogue fields; E1, D1, F1 for Jamesport—that serve as the initial ingredients in "building" a bottle of wine.

"There have been multiple issues with this wine," Mr. Massoud said, as he sampled a bit of the now complete 2004 Festival Chardonnay. The multiple issues include the fact that the wine's

fermentation got "stuck," which means that the yeast that normally converts the sugars in pressed grapes into alcohol prematurely stopped converting. That can be a big deal since a wine is partly defined by its balance between acidity and sugar. ("My chemistry's not too good," Mr. Massoud said—with a modesty that is quite becoming—and then proceeded to lecture on the nuances of pH, acid types, and assorted bacteria and yeast.) Not enough sugar, and acidity can overwhelm a wine's flavors and aromas. Too much sugar, and the wine will taste like a syrupy mess. "You don't want to be left with a cloying, sticky sensation," he said. "You want something that goes down clean."

After consulting with his father and some neighboring winemakers, Mr. Massoud managed to jumpstart the fermentation. "It was beautiful. The wine turned out bone dry. But it still has really fruity flavors." At \$12 dollars a bottle, Mr. Massoud has no doubt it will sell out.

In fact, Mr. Massoud sees a bright future for Paumanok. The family just purchased an additional 29 acres in nearby Jamesport, part of a 500-acre preserve with bluffs overlooking Long Island Sound acquired from Keyspan by the Peconic Land Trust. The family hopes to plant about 25 of these acres, which will increase Paumanok's planted area by nearly 50 percent. It may also build another tasting room at the site.

"We sell alcohol," Mr. Massoud said reverting to his economic persona. "That's a popular product. I think we also happen to make good wine. But I'm convinced another tasting room might boost sales by 50 percent."

Right now, however, the bottling line is his biggest concern. The work, which is both monotonous and meditative, encourages introspection. With the dull hum of the conveyor belt muting his voice, Mr. Massoud tried to explain why he would leave a lucrative career in finance to help his parents raise grapes in one of the mostly costly wine-making environments in the country. Bucking the wisdom of Econ 101, he finds a certain solace in the thrift of farming. "We don't need a lot to get by," he said. "We can raise our own food. Drink our own wine."

There's an even larger picture, since, when he's not bottling, Mr. Massoud's more glamorous responsibilities include tasting wines at the region's top restaurants, mingling at dinner parties, and communing with neighboring winemakers. Not to mention walking among rows of maturing vines on a sunny spring day. "It's never been about the money," he said. "It's the lifestyle. I feel like I retired 30 to 40 years early." □



Above: The proud family in 1983, including from left, Kareem, Ursula, Salim, Nabeel, and Charles Massoud. Opposite: Kareem Massoud manages chaos on the bottling line.