

Sip and Swirl

Drinking In the New Hampshire Winery Scene

By Rich Collins

Much like the diversity of the landscapes of our great Granite State, so are the numerous vineyards that have begun to crop up. Looking back just a few years ago, there wasn't much of a choice when it came to New Hampshire wineries, but things are certainly changing as more local wineries are rapidly appearing on the local scene. Wine trails are forming, local product awareness is heightened, awards and accolades are multiplying, and quality is improving as local winemakers persevere, developing wines that suit our chilly climate.

I encourage you to visit those in your own backyard and beyond, but for now, allow me to take you on a little trip through our local winery scene. Each has its own unique overall identity, wine style, and public presence—no cookie cutter wine experiences here! Most are humble, local, and hard working and have great respect for the land and vines.

And, as the NH wine industry grows, expect big changes. More wineries and tasting rooms are coming online every year. There's no end in sight as words gets out that local wine is good wine!

When speaking of New Hampshire wineries, we simply must start with Peter Oldak, the unofficial "grandfather" of the New Hampshire wine industry. Peter began his winery

operation some 17 plus years ago as a hobby, but with special attention to the future of his vineyard and a vested interest in the winemaking industry within the state. He kept notes, honed his craft, and determined which type of grapes would thrive in our less than ideal climate to make the best wine. As he gained knowledge, he shared it and has been a mentor to many of the newer generation of NH wineries.

His winery, Jewell Towne Vineyards in South Hampton, is a delightful distraction with a cozy and friendly tasting room and

a dizzying selection of all-grape wines available to sample. Jewell Towne is one of the largest producers in NH, making somewhere around 5,000 cases of wine per year from some of the oldest commercial vines in the state, yet pride themselves on doing nearly everything by hand from both local and imported grapes.

Soon after came the state's other flagship winery, Flag Hill Winery in Lee, which also began planting grapevines around the same time. However, Flag Hill also found that traditional New England fruit wines could be made with local fruit and also fit the palate of the local consumer. Flag Hill has even begun distilling—making vodka and brandy from apples, as well as producing other libations such as Cranberry Liquor, Sugar Maple Liquor, and North River Port. The winery has also entered into the social scene, hosting weddings and dinners throughout the season at their delightful vineyard property with regular tastings and tours for the public to enjoy.

For many years, these were the New Hampshire wineries and the industry expectations came from their original efforts. A lot has changed and there is a whole new crop of winemakers and wineries breaking onto the scene in rapid fashion, each with their own vision.



Courtesy of Flag Hill Winery

One such newcomer is Zorvino Vineyards in Sandown, a beautiful new vineyard property set among its own vines, complete with a wedding and special events space. Zorvino likes to keep it simple and fun, making both grape and fruit wines, regularly available for the public to taste and buy at the winery. Zorvino also hosts activities such as Murder Mystery Shows and Mardi Gras parties, food and wine pairings, and private events.

Down the road, you'll find Candia Vineyards, perhaps one of the smallest of wineries in the state, and the country. Owner Bob Dabrowski does it all himself, and welcomes visitors whenever he can, as long as they make an appointment beforehand. Bob just took the scene at the latest Big E wine competition, sweeping the New Hampshire category with a locally grown white called La Crescent.

Amherst is home to one of the vineyards to watch, LaBelle Winery. Starting out in a small barn, Amy Labelle and her husband have been growing their operation at a fast pace and doing well in both consumer and critics' minds alike. They've grown production from 200 bottles to 3,000 cases and will soon be building a new 5,600-square-foot winery operation in Amherst. LaBelle's success comes from a combination of grassroots marketing, a strong local presence, and a number of national awards including a "Best Small Winery in New England" award—impressive for a newcomer in a sea of new entries. They offer traditional grape wines, fruit wines, and some interesting and diverse products like jalapeno wine, and market themselves as a local operation with a flair for new and exciting flavors and products.

Lewis and Stacy Eaton run Sweet Baby Vineyard, a true family operation essentially located within their own home in Kensington, though a new post and beam barn has been raised that now serves as their new winery. Both the winery and many of their wines are named after the smallest members of their family clan, and with both owners native to New Hampshire, it's a local affair.

Says owner Stacy, "All of the fruit for our fruit wines come from New Hampshire farms. Applecrest in Hampton Falls grows all of our apples, peaches and strawberries; High Hopes Orchard in Westmoreland supplies our raspberries; and Taylor Brown Blueberry Farm in Alton produces all of our wild-mountain grown blueberries. We do not use any colors, extract, or other flavors in our fruits wines. Just 100 percent New Hampshire grown fruit."

And the critics agree! "Our Marechal Foch won Best in NH 2010 in *New Hampshire* magazine in their blind taste test," adds Stacey. They are open to the public on weekends and will soon be relocating the tasting room the new winery space.

On the west side of New Hampshire is a winemaker on a mission—Virginia Carter, owner of Walpole Mountain View Winery at Barnett Hill Vineyard. Virginia's operation is truly unique from the ground up: she's the only female viticulturist, female enologist, and female-owned winery operation to date.



Courtesy of Barnett Hill Vineyard

And to keep her on her toes, she has perhaps the most difficult climate of all the local vineyards to contend with. As a result she has chosen to build her vineyard operation around the fact that only the strongest will survive—in this case, the grapes that are most cold hardy. Virginia can also boast that 100 percent of the wine she sells comes entirely from within her own vineyard. She doesn't buy anything; if she doesn't grow it, you can't buy it. She has 31 varieties of true cold hardy grapes (1,400 plus of the coldest of the cold hardy plants) that she has been tending to for the last eight years.

Says Virginia, "All my wines are cutting edge—new aromas, new flavors, new wine names—something new to try for all those adventurous folks who have become a bit bored with the standard wines from warm climate areas such as chardonnay, merlot, cabernet, etc. Not that those aren't great wines ... but expanding one's menu of wine varieties is a wonderful thing."

Virginia is as local as you can get, and believes in treating the environment with the utmost respect. She is trying to keep the vineyard "as organic a vineyard as possible without losing my crops—no small thing when it comes to grapes." She treads lightly with her pesticide use, "trying every organic means available to take care of pest issues" before resorting to more tried and true but less environmentally friendly practices common to all farming. Sometimes the climate is too much for her vines following these gentler practices, but according to Virginia, "I'm okay with that, because I can feel very good that my workers, harvesters, and customers won't be breathing in or consuming something



Courtesy of Zorvino Vineyards/Tom Zack Photo

that may contain high levels of invisible chemicals that aren't the best for us. We also hand pick off insects and infected leaves—labor intensive, but it cuts down on the need for organic and restricted-use pesticides.”

“I'm hoping with all the new wineries coming online, that at least some of them follow my philosophy of growing their own. It's good for New Hampshire; good for the local economy (tourism); good for keeping NH land in agriculture; good for the people we hire; good for our own families growing up on these farms/vineyards; good for the people who value locally produced products; and good for the tourist looking for something and somewhere new and exciting to try.”

Her winery has indoor and outdoor tasting areas and a gift shop full of locally-made wine and local products, though remain closed in the colder winter months.

In Gilford, you'll find another small winery with a personal touch. Jane and Peter Ellis run Stonegate Vineyards, and produce about



Courtesy of Candia Vineyards

500 cases of wine a year. And they are perfectly happy with that number, as staying small allows them to stay passionate about what they do. Says Jane, “We welcome each and every visitor ourselves,” and take the time to share their love of their winery whose grapes were seeded nearly 11 years ago. Their wines have been available to the public for about four years, available for purchase in their delightful tasting room.

Yet another newbie on the Lakes Region scene is Eric Wiswall and his mysteriously named winery—Haunting Whisper Vineyards. Located in Danbury between Lake Sunapee and Newfound Lake, Haunting Whisper produces around 15 varieties of grape and fruit wines, is open to the public, and offers seasonal free tastings. Eric and his wife Erin purchased 75 acres with dreams of developing a functional winery—having recently obtained their commercial license, the dream has essentially come to fruition. And the story behind the name?

“Erin, my wife came up with the name ... she found our property to be haunting as we

Need Some Tips to Sip

There are a few important things to know before embarking on a local wine journey. Here are a few simple tips to allow you to get the most from NH's finest fermented libations.

Keep an open mind. Don't set expectations based on trips to the Napa Valley, Australia, or even the mass produced wines you buy in the grocery store. This is New England—the wine industry here is different, and more importantly, still developing as an industry. New Hampshire is literally booming with new winery activity every day and the sky is the limit when it comes to the growth potential. Remember that Europe once laughed at California as a premium winemaking region, and were soon proven wrong!

Appreciate each individual experience. Don't try to find the best wine, or the prettiest bottle, or the friendliest tasting room—try to embrace the message, the goals, and the overall product mix the wineries are trying to offer their customers. All wineries here are small and family owned with unique philosophies, and unlike most businesses of modern day, you can literally get close to the owners and hear their stories directly. With most proprietors on the property, it's truly a blessing to be able to see the progress of a local farming developing products that people truly love. It's not often you hear someone wax poetic about their jobs, but winery folks have a certain sense of social relevance, perhaps because wine truly is a social beverage. Take advantage of this by asking questions and sampling every chance you can find!

Courtesy of Gilmanton Winery



Think beyond the bottle. Winemaking is farming. Chemistry. Science. Labor. Throw in a spot of luck and a touch of skill, and you pretty much have it. The farming part seems simple: the grape vines grow, they produce fruit in the fall, which is picked, crushed, and the juice extracted to eventually become wine. This happens only once per year so the entire year's efforts are preparation for the fall harvest—the best time to visit—since there is so much activity available to observe. A great deal of physical labor goes into developing the best possible grapes, especially since all New Hampshire wineries are still doing pretty much everything themselves ... in small batches ... the old fashioned way. No mega wine factories here! It's neither glamorous nor easy, and really only becomes sexy once the end product sits glistening in your glass.

Plan on tasting wines you've never heard of, in styles that may be new to you. The typical wine grapes we are most familiar with (cabernet, merlot, Shiraz) quite simply won't grow in the Granite state. It is just too cold—they are not cold hardy for our negative winter temps, need copious amounts of daily sunshine to ripen, and ripen late in the season (after a typical New Hampshire frost). Thus it is realistically impossible to grow the varieties often seen in stores that are most familiar to us. Instead, our winemakers rely on cold hardy “hybrid” grapes that thrive in the cooler climates and weather the winter abuse. These are often genetic blends of native American grapes and European wine grapes. This brings the flavor profile of the European grapes with the cold hardiness of our own native species. As a result, we have different wine styles and flavors that are typically lighter, less complex, have higher acid (more tart) and show best when sweetened (this tempers the acidity and adds body and smoothness). Some wineries follow the commonplace practice of purchasing outside fruit (California, New York, Chile) but all of them create wines right here in New Hampshire.

Not all NH wines are sweet and/or fruit wine. Fruit wines—love 'em or hate 'em—but don't fall prey to the rumor that all of New Hampshire wines are sweet fruit wines. It's just not true; though many fruit wines and even grape wines do fall on the sweeter side of the spectrum when compared to store bought varieties. Overall, New Hampshire wineries make wine from a dazzling variety of raw materials—grapes, apples, pears, raspberries, blueberries, honey, and I've even heard of some home winemakers using tomatoes. But dry wines do exist, just ask!