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Welcome to Walpole Napa!

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Posted: Sunday, July 28, 2013 8:00 am

By Roxanne Rubell Contributing Writer

My GPS and I are at odds as I wind my way through the hills of Walpole. So I'm relegated to MapQuest, which first sends me to Charlestown before turning me back around in the direction of Walpole ...

Left turn, right turn, bear right, go up the hill, turn left, bear left again, destination will be on your right.

Thankfully, the scenery is soothing, because frustration has been trying to push my buttons and I'm a half-hour late to meet Virginia.

Virginia Carter, owner of and winemaker for Walpole Mountain View Winery at Barnett Hills Vineyards, is an absolute doppelganger for Meryl Streep. Of course, she's heard this many times, so when I mention it, she sort of rolls her eyes but smiles at the same time. It's showtime at the winery as they're officially open for the season, meaning an influx of local wine lovers and tourists, and public and private tastings, along with private parties and special events that are on the books for the coming months.

Being a successful vintner in New Hampshire is not an easy feat, although it's not as much of an anomaly as one might think. New Hampshire's first winery, South Hampton's Jewell Towne Vineyards, opened in 1994. Since then, winemaking in the state has experienced steady growth — there are now more than 23 licensed wine manufacturers producing a myriad of different varietals.

This increase is due in large part to the development of cold-climate grapevines, and we can thank scientists at the University of Minnesota for their precision lab work in developing these. In 1996, they created the first cold-climate red wine grapevine, Frontenac, the result of research and cross breeding. This hearty French-American hybrid, designed to withstand temperatures of 30 to 50 degrees below zero, opened up a whole new space on the trellis for aspiring winemakers who, due to icy winter weather, might otherwise have been relegated to daydreaming about wine country in California or Oregon.

For Carter, originally from Buffalo, N.Y., and her husband Paul, a love of wine and passion for knowledge about winemaking fueled their foray into the business in 2004 when they planted 250 cold-climate vines. Their first harvest was in 2006 and thanks to the gravelly, mineral-rich soil, or terroir, growth and production has increased rapidly. The winery now grows more than 25 different types of grapes and makes and sells anywhere from 24 to 26 different wines.

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Carter admits that given the relative infancy of this new breed of grapevines, it's sometimes a hit or miss for the winemaker. Some of the Walpole wines probably won't impress wine aficionados, as they're more on the sweet side and sometimes lacking in bouquet and finish. The dry whites, such as Barnett Hill White, are more like a sweeter Riesling.

Fort No. 3, an off-dry red named after the former fort that is now home to the Walpole Inn, is not at its peak drinkability yet and has a bit too much brown sugar on the tongue. But dry reds such as Marquette '10 and Vintner's Reserve "Cinq Noir" are definitely on a par with some Napa Valley and Santa Ynez Valley wines.

The grounds of the winery itself are worth getting lost to find. And, while it's not Burgundy, the 180-degree view from the porch is spectacular and well worth the price of admission if you opt for the purchase of a custom-etched wine glass that comes with six wines from any of the ones available — although no purchase is necessary to just visit. Carter encourages guests to bring their own food to pair with the wine but there is also an array of edibles to choose from in the winery's store. Since Carter is a locavore, she is dedicated to showcasing products made and/or grown in New Hampshire, including artisan cheeses, baked goods and locally sourced produce.

If you go ...

Even directionally challenged drivers (who, me?) can leave the GPS at home as the winery has put up ample signage that will get you there. Located on Barnett Hill Road in Walpole, the winery is open Fridays from 5 to 7 p.m., Saturdays from noon to 6 p.m., and Sundays from 1 to 6 p.m., and is also available for private tasting parties and functions. For more information, call 756-3948, or visit online at www.bhvineyard.com

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