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Fresh and Breezy

As Long Island matures as a wine region, vintners heed *terroir* to refine their bottlings

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In wine, as in so many things, there are two paths to success: that of the hedgehog and that of the fox. Hedgehogs focus on doing one thing well. In New York, the Finger Lakes has followed this route, surging to prominence behind its efforts with Riesling. Long Island, in contrast, has chosen the way of the fox—experimentation and diversity, shifting style and focus over time.

With a checkered history defined by a scattered mix of varieties and sometimes overambitious winemaking, Long Island wines were consistently inconsistent. But thanks to the experience of winemakers now benefiting from nearly a generation of harvests, and a recent spate of ideal growing seasons, Long Island is showing its strengths more clearly. Recent tastings have revealed fresh, detailed whites and more elegantly styled reds, with a focus on blue-chip grapes such as Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet Franc.

Over the past 12 months, I have blind-tasted 193 wines from Long Island. The results are very encouraging, with 118 of the wines (61 percent) earning very good ratings, or 85 points or better on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale. (A [free alphabetical list](#) of all wines tasted for this report is available.)

The top wine is the Wölffer Estate Late Harvest Descencia Long Island 2015 (90, \$40/375ml), an unctuous peach- and nectarine-filled dessert wine made from a blend of botrytis-affected Riesling and Chardonnay grapes.

Wölffer's longtime winemaker and partner, Roman Roth, also makes wines under his own Grapes of Roth label. The Grapes of Roth Merlot Long Island 2012 (89, \$44) still has freshness, displaying a range of tea-, savory- and spice-infused plum and black cherry flavors carried by singed sandalwood and cedar threads.

Most of the wines in this report come from two recent vintages, with reds primarily from 2014 and whites from 2015. Both years produced excellent crops, though in markedly different styles. The 2014 vintage proved a bit too generous, with low humidity and abundant sunshine leading to higher-than-normal yields. "Wineries that managed to keep their yields at a normal level got rewarded with fantastic quality," notes Roth.

In contrast, "2015 was equally dry, but the last two months of the vintage were very warm, and the crop was naturally low that year, making for some very plush and soft wines," says Richard Olsen-Harbich, winemaker at Bedell Cellars in Cutchogue. "In general I would say the 2015 whites are a bit riper and fuller-bodied than the 2014s, while for reds, 2015 is looking more like one of our best vintages."

Olsen-Harbich is one of the deans of Long Island winemaking, with a tenure that dates to the 1980s. His experience shows in the Bedell Cabernet Franc North Fork of Long Island 2014 (89, \$45), which offers a pure beam of red currant and bitter cherry fruit laced with subtle minerality and carried by moderate but persistent grip. The winery's Chardonnay North Fork of Long Island 2015 (88, \$35) is another successful bottling, again relying on a fresh, breezy persona to deliver unadorned pear and green apple notes, with a verbena hint. Both wines are textbook examples of what Long Island can do well—elegant bottlings built on bright acidity and unencumbered by hefty oak or aggressive winemaking. It's a noticeable trend among the region's producers.

"For Chardonnay and oak, many winemakers have moved away from completely barrel-fermenting these wines, especially in newer barrels," says Olsen-Harbich. "The key to me is the use of neutral oak for this purpose. It's not just a question of oak or no oak. It's all about the age of the barrel and how long the wine is in it. I feel that some portion of neutral oak helps with the mouthfeel and texture of Chardonnay, as well as the benefits one gets from lees aging. That can't be replicated as easily in a stainless-steel tank."

Other top producers reviewed in this report include Clovis Point and Lieb Cellars. The Clovis Point Cabernet Franc North Fork of Long Island 2014 (88, \$35) has racy, vivid fruit, with savory and violet accents. The Lieb Cellars Pinot Blanc North Fork of Long Island Reserve 2014 (87, \$20) is one of this report's top values, offering pretty melon and pear fruit, with good tension through the finish.

"Regarding oak, yes, I would agree this is an evolving trend for the better," says Lieb winemaker Russell Hearn, who has worked on Long Island since the 1990s. "In a cool climate, your calling card is fruit intensity, not body. In the early years, the region was trying too hard to be like other areas, less successfully. I feel a comfort zone now among my peers that elegance, crisp acidity and bright fruit flavors are what we can do best."

One hiccup for Long Island wines is pricing; value remains relatively rare. There are only 10 wines in this report rating 85 points or higher that cost \$20 or less per bottle, including the Macari Chardonnay North Fork of Long Island 2015 (88, \$19) and Paumanok Chardonnay North Fork of Long Island Festival 2015 (87, \$19). In general though, price tags for Long Island wines are more than you might expect—half the wines in this report cost \$30 or more per bottle.

All told, there are only about 3,000 acres of vines on Long Island. Production levels for most of the wines are small, rarely topping 1,000 cases. This combination of small production and wineries' ease of selling out of their own tasting rooms results in Long Island operating largely outside of mainstream distribution. On the flip side, a burgeoning food scene (see "[Long Island Dining](#),") makes a visit to these wineries an ideal weekend getaway from New York City. With the region's improving quality, the wines are increasingly worth consumer attention. So if it takes a few days on the picturesque end of Long Island to delve into the wines, it's a pretty good deal.

Senior editor James Molesworth is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Long Island.

- [James Molesworth's Recommended Wines from Long Island \(in PDF Format\)](#)
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