

## Exploring Long Island's wine industry

Exploring Long Island's Wine Industry by Timothy Martinson, American Fruit Grower, Dec 2001

### Vine Lines

LONG ISLAND'S grape industry on the North Fork, a narrow strip of land 15 miles long, bounded by the city of Riverhead, Long Island Sound, and Peconic Bay, has grown from 50 acres in the late 1970s to over 3000 acres of grapes in production today. This growth, fueled by high profile investors, promotion, and meticulous viticulture, makes Long Island the East's closest equivalent to high-end wine regions such as Napa and Sonoma. I visited Long Island in September and was impressed with the skill and knowledge exhibited by vineyard managers there.

### The Long Island Environment

Development pressure, rising land values, and a shallow aquifer overlaid by sandy soils have fueled a strong farmland preservation movement. Over \$25 million in county and state funds have been used to purchase development rights, and farmland values have skyrocketed to the \$30,000 to \$50,000 per acre range. As a result, much land formerly in potatoes has been converted to vineyards. Pesticide use is under close scrutiny by the general public, state regulators, and advocacy groups. Several pesticides have label use restrictions.

### Viticulture

Careful canopy management and yield management is almost universally practiced. Vineyardists start the season by thinning shoots to three to four per foot, eliminating double shoots, and removing flower clusters on short shoots. They then make three to four passes for moving catch wires, and summer hedge two to three times. Long Island growers control their crop size through early and late cluster thinning. Bird pressure is severe, so growers put netting on all their acreage. Annual production costs range from \$3500 to \$4500 per acre.

### Varieties And Climate

Despite the low yields, ripening and harvest are generally two to three weeks behind the Finger Lakes. I attribute this to the low to moderate vigor sites and a maritime climate with warmer nights and cooler days than upstate New York. Frost comes late, so growers can often let fruit hang until early- to mid-November. These conditions (and moderate winters) are apparently ideal for Merlot, the signature red variety, and Chardonnay, the most common white. Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc are also produced, and used in meritage blends.

### Custom Operations

Many startup operations have wisely relied upon custom vineyard management companies to get their vineyards up and running. Their involvement has undoubtedly contributed to Long Island's success.

After my visit, I certainly can identify ways that growers in our region could improve vineyard practices to raise quality. However, even at \$1500 per ton, a grower producing 2.5 tons would not recoup the annual costs of production (let alone the \$40,000 per acre land cost). The real question is whether these meticulous practices can increase quality to the point where customers will fork over more cash for the product. It's happened in Long Island. Will it happen here?

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