

Prologue

The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away.

—Pablo Picasso

It was the light. The way it reflected over the open fields and seemed to bounce over the ground. That was the main thing I noticed about my first visit to the North Fork. I'd been to many places, but the North Fork was different. I felt the magic, smelling the sea air and the freshly tilled soil blown by a gentle breeze that filled my soul.

The North Fork has been an important farming area for centuries, first for Native Americans and, starting in the 1600s, for the early colonists. There is a solace to the place and a long history going back to the founding days of our nation. Some of the oldest houses and farms in the country still survive there, whispering the stories of people from another time. Many families have worked the land for generations, and it remains a vital farming community to this day, generating some of the highest agricultural revenues in New York. The conditions are idyllic for growing crops with deep, fertile soils with few rocks to impede cultivation. On some farms, the land rolls right down to the shoreline.

The land from Wading River to Orient Point is blessed with a gentle, maritime climate that is neither too cold in winter nor too hot in summer. It is genuinely a Goldilocks place—a bucolic oasis in an otherwise harsh northern zone less than one hundred miles east of the largest metropolis in North America. It's a miracle it exists at all.

I've always loved the outdoors. As a child growing up in New Hyde Park, within walking distance of the Queens border, the thought of living

in open spaces always felt liberating. I wasn't raised in a wine-centric home, although wine flows through the veins of my family history.

My paternal grandfather came to New York City from Austria in 1912. He played the piano and found work in silent movie theaters while also laboring as a mechanic in a shipyard during the First World War. Once the war was over, and the "talkies" arrived, he worked for a tavern on Carlisle Street in Lower Manhattan. With the onset of prohibition, he helped turn the tavern into a speakeasy, which he managed for over a decade. After returning to Austria in the early thirties, he took over his family's hotel, where my father would help him source wine from nearby Moravian vineyards. Some of my father's earliest memories were of filling bottles of wine from a barrel in the tavern's cellar. He told me he used to sneak tastes when his father wasn't looking. It was his favorite job.

My mother's side of the family came from the German wine region of the Nahe. She was born in a house surrounded by hillside vineyards, and her parents worked for local winemakers while they were growing up. As I like to say, wine runs through my family's genes. It didn't take too much to turn on the switch.

My earliest recollection of wine was from a homemade batch my maternal grandfather made from red currants. He grew a small row of these bushes on the side of our garage, and every summer, he would pick and crush the berries into a small glass carboy. For a few weeks, the clear jug of pink liquid would ferment in our basement, and I would sit and watch the water bubble and burp in the glass fermentation lock. In time, the bubbles would become less frequent, and eventually, my grandfather would take a rubber hose and pour some into a small glass. I can recall the taste—fizzy and sour—and I remember hearing my grandfather laugh as I ran back upstairs to get something to wash it down. Growing up, the best wines I remember weren't from the local store; they were brought home from Germany after my parents or grandparents visited relatives. I had to wait until a Thanksgiving dinner or Christmas goose to taste those. Nahe wines remain my "soul food" to this day.

As far back as I can remember, I knew I never wanted to wear a suit and tie and work in an office. As a boy, I constantly sought the outdoors, whether it was in a local park or by the sea. As I got older, something inside of me pulled me outside to work with my hands and make things grow. I spent summers working at a local nursery and public garden, getting soil under my fingernails, learning as much as possible about plants, driving tractors, and being part of a team. My late mom never got over the fact

that in my high school yearbook, I put the word “farmer” down under the section that listed my future career goals. It’s what I wanted to be then, and it turns out it wasn’t far from the truth. Making wine is like being a farmer; we’re taking the crop to its next incarnation, at the mercy of the weather, climate, and countless issues beyond our control.

This desire followed me into college and, eventually, to Cornell University, where I discovered my future career and my future wife. I laid eyes on Nancy the first day we both arrived at Cornell, and I’ve been in love ever since. It took me a few more months to eventually fall in love with wine. I’d dabbled in agronomy and dairy science and even considered a career in tropical agriculture for a time. Still, it wasn’t until I started learning about grapes that something took root in me. I remember sharing a bottle of a 1979 Hermann Wiemer Riesling with Nancy in my apartment in Ithaca, NY. It was a revelation, and I soon knew what I wanted to do. I cobbled together all the classes I could find about viticulture and enology and, along with lots of independent study, started my viticultural journey.

I first worked in vineyards during the summer of 1982 for David and Stephen Mudd, two founders of the North Fork region. My days were long and filled with hoeing weeds, tying up vines, sawing dead grapevine trunks, and anything else that needed to get done. I spent days in the hot sun riding a two-seated planter, placing new vines in the ground, one at a time, while inhaling exhaust from a tractor. Once we finished the planting, I hauled thousands of wooden posts off trucks, laid them out in the field, and one by one, set them up as straight as I could before a post-pounder hammered them into the ground. Vineyard work was strenuous and dirty, but it was incredibly gratifying.

My journey continued straight after graduation from Cornell at a small start-up in Bridgehampton on the South Fork. Here, I literally learned from the ground up, managing both the vineyard and cellar. When I arrived in early June of 1983, I found most of the twenty-five-acre vineyard sprawling over the ground and partially flooded. I had no winery equipment save for a few un-jacketed stainless-steel tanks, no tractor, no sprayer, and no crew. I couldn’t have been more thrilled. The owner, Lyle Greenfield, wisely hired the highly respected Finger Lakes winemaker Hermann Wiemer as a consultant, and I worked alongside Hermann for two years, honing my craft. I made just two stainless steel white wines for the first few years—a Chardonnay and a Riesling. It was one of the first domestic Chardonnays made this way and probably ahead of its time. Back then, many people thought we were out of our minds trying to sell a bottle of wine from Long Island for twelve

dollars, but we did, and it sold out quickly. Lyle and I worked tirelessly to make the business work and had many successful years, including having one wine make the *Wine Spectator* Top 100. But ultimately, despite our optimism about the Atlantic's tempering breezes, the low-lying site posed insurmountable challenges for grape growing. And it didn't help that the '80s had been the coldest decade on record in the Hamptons.

Ironically, my love of working outside eventually led me away from the vineyard and into the wine cellar. I soon learned that making great wine in this part of the world takes tremendous expertise in viticulture and enology—and I was determined to succeed. Since my first vintage as a winemaker in the fall of 1983, I've worked a harvest every year—picking grapes, pressing, fermenting, and nursing them into wine through all kinds of weather and conditions.

Once the Bridgehampton Winery sold, I went to work for Alex and Louisa Hargrave on their eponymous estate. Working in the historic vineyard and cellar where our modern wine district began was thrilling and humbling and my winemaking education grew because of that experience. Over the years, I consulted for many producers, including Gristina, Palmer, Jamesport, Paumanok, Wölffer, Peconic Bay, Schnieder, Broadfields, Channing Daughters, Croteaux, and Raphael, along with several upstate producers. I was eventually hired to direct the winemaking program at Raphael in 1997. I had a prolific, fourteen-year run with that estate before being hired in 2010 to lead the winemaking effort at the iconic Bedell Cellars, where I've settled in ever since.

During the early days, there was a huge learning curve as no information on Long Island winemaking was available. The reference books I had were either from the West Coast or in another language—and there wasn't any Google translation available. I was lucky to have a great mentor in Hermann Wiemer and learned from many others along the way, including Stephen Mudd, Lyle Greenfield, Alex and Louisa Hargrave, Larry Perrine, Dan Kleck, Alice Wise, and the great Paul Pontallier of Château Margaux. Even so, it took a lot of trial and error to figure things out. As I like to tell people, no one has made more mistakes in the wine cellar than I have. Every place I've worked, I learned something new—good and bad. I learned to build on my knowledge by holding on to the techniques that worked and discarding the rest. I think it's a good lesson for life in general.

Winemakers have one chance a year to get it right; if you're unhappy with the results, you must wait an entire year to try again. Luckily, I've been given many chances to get it right and have spent my career working to define a definitive style of wine for the North Fork.

In a world where instant gratification is often not good enough, and data can travel in a millisecond, the craft of growing grapes and making wine seems downright antiquated—and it is. Winemaking is an ancient profession providing a link to the past, a panacea for the present, and hope for the future.

As I enter the autumn of my life, I felt the time was right to pass along what I've learned from one of the country's most surprising yet rewarding wine regions. I'm aware that not everyone will agree with it all, but to paraphrase The Band, you can take what you want and leave the rest. This book comprises what I've learned and come to know in over forty years of growing grapes and making wine on Long Island. This is my own experience, my awareness. And now it's yours for the taking.

Developing a new wine region and a new wine style for our country is not a task for the faint of heart. Many "experts" didn't think we would succeed here, and some naysayers still believe that. We've had to fight for respect and recognition every step of the way and continue to do so. However, a track record of success precedes this book and these words. A level of excellence has been achieved through the efforts of many dedicated and passionate people who put roots in the ground on the North Fork to create unique and world-class wines.

This fact was never more apparent than in January of 2013 when the 2009 Bedell Merlot was chosen to be served at President Barack Obama's second inaugural luncheon held at the National Statuary Hall in the Capitol Building following President Obama's swearing-in. About two hundred guests attended the luncheon, including President Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, their families, as well as cabinet members, leaders of Congress, and Supreme Court justices. It was the first time a New York wine was chosen for an inaugural event, proving that North Fork wine had truly arrived. I was enormously proud.

Although I happily worked in Bridgehampton for almost ten years and wrote the Hamptons American Viticultural Area (AVA), this book is focused primarily on the North Fork. Previous books on the Long Island wine region covered the entire East End and the few vineyards that grow wine grapes west of Riverhead. But the heart, soul, and foundation of the Long Island wine district lie within the North Fork AVA. It is where I spent most of my winemaking career and where over ninety percent of Long Island wine grapes are grown. Without the North Fork, it would be hard for the Hamptons and greater Long Island AVAs to survive and have enough critical mass to impact the wine world. As of this writing, the North

Fork of Long Island remains the leading producer of European wine grapes on the East Coast in terms of acreage and tonnage.

Making wine—great wine—requires an understanding of where you're making it. It's been my life's work to learn about the North Fork and why it works so well for wine, and this book consists of what I have discovered. It's exhilarating making wine in a brand-new region, and I'm still amazed by what our soil and climate can produce. I feel blessed to be part of this profession and believe my ancestors would be as happy as I am with my career choice. The combination of hospitality and agriculture fits right in with my genetic history. Of course, running a speakeasy isn't the same as making wine, but we were both after the same things—giving people what they want and trying to make them happy.

I originally started to write this book many years ago but gave up, thinking I didn't have enough to say. Maybe I didn't back then, but now, I hope my words will add to the historical record of the Long Island wine industry, of which I am forever a part. And maybe, like any vintage, I won't know until it's in the bottle—or between the covers, in the case of this book.

I feel it's what I need to do right now. Hopefully, it sheds light on a profession and a business that is often a mystery to people. Or maybe it'll just help my children and grandchildren get to know me better. Mainly, I hope this book will help other North Fork winegrowers along their journey. After all, if one wants to make terroir wines on the North Fork, one needs to know what our terroir is and understand its legacy in the history of winemaking from this place that I know and love. A place that is neither too hot nor too cold. A place that feels just right.