

Wednesday, March 10, 2010

Question of Respect for Region's Best

By Louisa Thomas Hargrave

I have written before about how difficult it has been to get people to take seriously wines that are produced right down the road—even people who are devoted to buying local produce.

This view was supported by a recent article (February 13) by journalist Damon Darlin in the New York Times Sunday Business section. Mr. Darlin wrote that local wines, even in California, are commonly overlooked by locavores who “would be scandalized if a Chilean grape was served ...to them.”

The good news is that the attitude toward Long Island wine is changing among New York restaurants at the top of the food chain. Mr. Darlin's claim, “Rarely ... do you hear a New York restaurant bragging of its Long Island wine,” was true a couple of years ago, but there has been a mood swing among restaurateurs lately.

According to several Long Island winery principals, including Charles Massoud of Paumanok Vineyard, Roman Roth of Wölffer Estates, and Larry Perrine of Channing Daughters, over the past couple of years the number of prominent New York restaurateurs featuring Long Island wine has changed markedly. This is partly due to the locavore movement, and partly due to a sea change in sommeliers, as many at the finest restaurants have learned to buy the wines that go best with

food, rather than those with the highest Parker or Wine Spectator scores.

Although there is still a lag in the average restaurant's embrace of local wines in the New York metro area, many leading chefs and sommeliers are already there. Wines from Long Island can be found (for example) at Bouley, Daniel, Jean Georges, Gramercy Tavern, Four Seasons, Union Square Café, Blue Hill, The Modern, Tribeca Grill, Rouge Tomate, Per Se, the Oyster Bar, Momofuku ... all top-rated eateries. Restaurateurs with a taste for authenticity and an aversion to excessively alcoholic wines are finally coming home.

One restaurateur on Long Island has taken support of local wines a step further. At Verace, a new, Italian-themed restaurant in Islip, owner Michael Bohlsen is serving wine on tap from Raphael, the Peconic winery owned by the Petrocelli family.

Over the years, the Bohlsen family, who own several other restaurants on Long Island, including Teller's, Prime, Beachtree, and H2O, have become concerned about how much packaging like corks, bottles, and cartons adds to both the cost and carbon imprint of their business. Their beverage manager, Paolo Villela, who came to them from Windows on the World, searched for two years to find a way to offer customers quality wines in an environmentally friendly way, at a lower price, and finally

developed stainless steel “eco kegs,” each holding the equivalent of 28 bottles of wine that is protected from oxygen by inert nitrogen. Raphael’s winemaker, Richard Olsen-Harbich, loved the idea of offering his wines in this way, and worked with Vilella and his staff to make a custom premium sauvignon blanc, plus a merlot-based red blend for Verace. Verace passes the savings on packaging along to its customers, charging under \$10 a glass. The wines can also be ordered by the carafe, as in Italian trattorias.

In his piece about why restaurants fail to support local wines, Mr. Darlin wrote, “Wine doesn’t have to be fresh to be good. And freshness is the compelling reason driving the locavore movement.” When I visited Verace to taste their wines on tap, I found them to be exceptionally fresh tasting—so fresh as to challenge the idea that freshness is not an issue in bottled wine. All of them suited Verace’s menu of authentic Italian cuisine, made entirely in-house.

Although the menu appears to be similar to the menus of thousands of other Italian restaurants on Long Island, the food that comes out of Verace’s kitchen is anything but ordinary, taking steamed mussels, spaghetti and meatballs, shrimp risotto, and chicken Parmigiana to a superior level of flavor and (again) freshness.

Considering this restaurant’s emphasis on Italian, rather than on regional, cuisine, I found it especially gratifying to see its owners’ loyalty to local wine, not only for ecological reasons, but also for its quality and value.

Tasting Verace’s local wines on tap brought me back to an experience I had several years ago, when I traveled through northern Italy with my daughter Anne, visiting vineyards and following the trail of the Renaissance artist Raphael.

We had spent an exhausting day traipsing around Florence when we stumbled into a small place, not listed in the guide books. There was no

wine list, only carafes of house wine. When we took our first sips, the wine was so surprisingly delicious that we completely cracked up with laughter. I’m sure everyone thought that something was wrong with us, but we couldn’t curb our enthusiasm.

Wouldn’t it be fine if more local wine could be served like this—fresh, delicious, and accessible?