# wine *by association*

by Abby Luby

IT'S A DEEP PASSION that drives the wine grower to grow the perfect wine grape. Each vine is nurtured from burrowed root to trellised stem, protected from disease and the elements to ultimately yield the sugar-laden, juice-filled fruit for the delicious libation. That passion is especially strong for wine growers venturing to plant new fields and launch the long process of establishing a productive vineyard.

In the Hudson Valley, the Hudson Valley Wine and Grape Association (HVWGA) is harnessing that zeal and mustering it into action. The organization, whose 50 members include both commercial wineries and amateur wine makers, has sponsored educational seminars and workshops for its members and holds an annual wine competition. Their long-range goal? To produce wine from grapes solely grown in the Hudson Valley.

Michael Migliore, the current president of HVWGA and owner of Whitecliff Vineyard, in Gardiner, says the group started about four years ago mainly to educate and promote wine growers in the Hudson Valley and to produce more Hudson Valley grapes. The group's new goal is to double the total available acreage for wine growing.

"Our aim is to expand Hudson Valley vineyards by 1,000 acres," says Migliore. "I surveyed my own wine organization—the Shawangunk Wine Trail—which just expanded to 11 wineries. That survey gave me a figure of close to 750 acres worth of grapes under vine. I did another survey of people in our grape growers' association and came up with a total of 1,000 acres—and that's a conservative number."

Migliore notes that there is a growing demand for Hudson Valley wine grapes by area wineries that currently mainly use grapes from Finger Lakes or Long Island

vineyards. "We surveyed members about the amount of grapes they are buying outside the Hudson Valley and what they envisioned their demand for grapes would be in four years, which is what it takes to start producing grapes. I can tell you that we could satisfy 1,000 more acres worth of grape production in the valley right now. There's that much demand."

But finding a thousand acres suitable for growing grapes in the Hudson Valley is no easy task, says Cornell Cooperative Extension's Steve McKay, the Regional Fruit Educator and pomologist. McKay, who has worked with Hudson Valley growers for 20 years, has been the association's main mentor, advising them on new directions and tools for expansion. "We just got word that an $85,000 state grant was awarded to us to research different possible sites for growing in the Hudson Valley," McKay says. "In the Hudson Valley, the sites are scattered around and not in just one area. We have to record temperatures at different sites, test the soil, and talk to other growers about expanding their already existing sites. It's an immense task."

*Steve McKay worked with a similar group in California's Anderson Valley . . . "I see the same kind of positive energy here in the Hudson Valley," he says. "People are active and want to participate and they want to see the project succeed. It's very encouraging."*

McKay also helped the association sponsor education events and run enology labs, where basic winemaking skills were taught. The organization taps into resources from Cornell seminars and labs, which are open to the public. "Five years ago, we put an education program together and we would meet at different wineries," McKay recalls. "The goal was to have an open forum about what new developments there were in the wine industry."

HVWGA member John Hudelson is an amateur grower with a one-acre plot right on the Hudson River. He has lived at that site for 22 years and has been growing grapes for the last 20 years. From his experience, Hudelson says the Northeast climate makes wine growing a challenge. "The Hudson Valley climate is more changeable than other places such as California or the middle Americas," says Hudelson. "There's more of a chance for a cold winter to wipe out many of your vines, or sometimes all of them. That's a constant you have to deal with here. We have had to choose clones and varieties that can better adapt to our winters."

Cooler climates are known to produce grapes with a higher level of acidity, which gives the wines made from them a clean and crisp taste, according to *Valley Table* Contributing Editor Steven Kolpan, who also holds an endowed chair in wine studies at the Culinary Institute of America. "There is a real recognition in the world that cool climate creates the best wine—that's the bottom line. In the

warm Napa Valley, ripeness is never the issue; here, it's all about getting the grapes ripe enough to create a good wine and still have good sugar-to-acid balance in the grapes. To me, the Hudson Valley is a great place to make a sparkling wine because of the high acidity, and for making cool weather still wines like Riesling, Gewürztraminer and Chardonnay."

Kolpan says that Chardonnay from California usually has a big, buttery, oaky taste, but it's too often overly alcoholic. "The beauty of Hudson Valley Chardonnays is that they can be crisp, fresh and complex, and they can take to a bit of oak maturation nicely. Also, they don't knock you out by the second glass—your head isn't swimming in alcohol, as you are with too many California Chardonnays."

The ideal climate to grow wine grapes depends on the site. Acres that are already farmed with other fruit can satisfy much of the grape-growing criteria. Apple-farm acreage is a prime source for growing wine grapes, says Migliore, because apple growers who are being squeezed both from Washington State apples and apple juice concentrate from China may now be ready to diversify.

Recently, the HVWGA reached out to apple farmers. "There has been an effort to let apple growers know there is another avenue open to them to make money. Wineries in the area are a key outlet," Migliore stresses. "Let's say a farmer grows 300 acres of apples—we are not suggesting that he change over to 300 acres of grapes. What we are suggesting is that, because he has expertise in growing fruit, because he has the labor and equipment, that, with help from Cornell University and contracts from wineries, we can make this mutually beneficial." Migliore explains that Cornell could help the apple farmers identify the best sites for grapes and advise on the selection of different varieties. "It's a win for the wineries and a win for the apple growers," he says.

Recently, the growers' association met with a handful of apple farmers in Marlboro at a meeting hosted by Senator Bill Larkin (RC, Cornwall-on-Hudson). "We think there are apple farmers interested in pursuing this," says Migliore. But, of course, growing practices are different for apples than they are for wine grapes. Pruning for less tonnage, not more, is the practice for the best wine grapes, says McKay; it's a question of achieving a certain quality grape. "If the quality is not high enough in sugar then the price is going to be lower," he explains. "That's why the vines have to be cut back. Generally, the vinifera grapes—the ones from Europe—will have a smaller crop but a much higher value. The hybrid grapes—the cross between local American and vinifera—can have a higher yield and a bit lower price."

An example, McKay explains, is the high-yield Concord grape, used for grape juice and (mostly) inferior wines. "The Concord might have a yield of six to eight tons per acre and get between $250 and $300 a ton. Other fine vinifera can yield two-and-a-half tons an acre but you would get about $2,500 a ton. The value per ton is higher and the value of the wine is higher, so you win on both ends. The biggest tonnage is a lot less."

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***—Michael Migliore***

PHOTO OF MICHAEL MIGLIORE COURTESY WHITECLIFF VINEYARD

Guaranteeing a price for Hudson Valley grapes depends on the experience of the wine grower and the quality of the grapes, says Migliore, who is willing to offer long-term contracts to skilled growers. "I am, together with a few of the other wineries, willing to contract with growers as long as they meet the quality specifications of the grapes," he says. "If the farmer is an experienced fruit grower, then we would probably sign a contract up front. If it's someone with a patch of land in the middle of nowhere with no experience, he would have to show us that he could actually grow grapes at the right quality level."

Migliore says economic guarantees probably would be offered to farmers growing vinifera (like Riesling, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay or Cabernet Franc), or grapes that currently are often purchased outside the valley or those growing useful hybrid varieties (like Vignoles, Vidal Blanc, Chambourcin, and de Chaunac, among others).

"The farmer who puts in four acres of Riesling would stand a 50 percent chance of getting a future contract with the growers' association," he says. "Probably the winery would want to see some evidence of performance first, and that contract may not come up until the summer before harvest. As a winery, I could go out there and inspect the crop, determine that [the farmer] has good agricultural practices, there's no disease and he's not over-cropping and harvesting too many grapes per vine, which is detrimental to the wine quality."

For the most part, Migliore will rely on an ongoing dialogue and try to be flexible with growers. "It also depends what varieties are being grown, how much in demand they are and what we see as the long-term growing viability of those grapes," he says.

Starting a new crop of wine grapes may seem a harder road to travel than simply selling off farmland to the growing number of developers willing to pay top dollar for acres. "I think the goal of maintaining the rural and agricultural character of the Hudson Valley is an important, even noble goal, but what we are fighting is becoming New York City's suburbia. The development pressures are tremendous," Kolpan observes. "If I were a farmer of retirement age and my children didn't want to become farmers (which, statistically includes about 90 percent of them), I would seriously be tempted to sell the land to the highest bidder, unless I felt there were ways to sustain [its use] for agriculture."

The economic playing field could be leveled somewhat, Kolpan adds. "Farmers could sell their land—to another farmer—and keep it agricultural. Then capital gains on the sale shouldn't be levied."

In fact, as more and more Hudson Valley communities see farmland converting to tract housing developments, more town governments and conservation organizations have embraced the local farmers with open-space protection programs or agricultural incentives that include purchase of development rights or conservation easements.

Judith M. LaBelle, President of the Glynwood Center, an organization that acts as a liaison with communities to

preserve open space and farms, cites these programs as essential tools to help stave off development.

"Some of the programs work by having the farmer retain ownership and operation of the land, but the towns purchase the development rights," she explains. "Generally, if you have a 100-acre farm and it's two-acre zoning, the town would pay the farmer for agreeing not to sell off a certain part of the land."

Glynwood's research so far is mostly on dairy and vegetable farms, says LaBelle. "We do recognize that there is a tremendous competitive pressure that orchards are under and we are trying to work with more of them and understand the issues more thoroughly."

According to LaBelle, some communities have sought the authority from the state legislature to be able to collect a fee when land is sold. That fee can go into a fund to protect lands. The Chatham Town Board, for example, has asked the state legislature for the authority to impose a 2 percent real property transfer fee on sales of property in excess of a base value. Warwick also hosts an extremely active land-preservation constituency that has been effective in developing programs to support local farmers.

Holding on to farmland and diversifying crops may be a winning combination in about a decade. Cesar Baeza, an HVWGA member and winemaster of Brotherhood Winery, in Washingtonville, says it takes at least three years to grow a normal wine grape crop. "Right now we use a lot more grapes than we are producing in the Hudson Valley. We use about 500 tons of grapes from the Finger Lakes and Long Island," he says. "If I can get 500 tons from the Hudson Valley, that would be ideal, which is why we are aiming for other people to plant grapes. All the wineries are in the same boat—we all want the same few grapes that are in the area."

For Hudelson, growing more Hudson Valley grapes goes hand-in-hand with improving the overall quality of the grapes. It's also one of the steps in starting a grape varietal-based appellation wine, another new direction for the growers' association.

"This has not been done by any viticultural group in America. An appellation in Europe means that it comes from a specific area and that you are legally limited to growing only certain grapes to use in that wine," Hudelson says. "If we come up with a blend of wines and we look for a consistency in the wines year after year and we associate the Hudson Valley name with it, we could call it 'Hudson Highland' wine, or something like that. We haven't decided on the name and we haven't decided on the grapes we are going to use."

McKay worked with a similar grape-grower group in California's Anderson Valley, home to fine sparkling wines, Riesling, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir years ago. "I see the same kind of positive energy here in the Hudson Valley," he says. "People are active and want to participate and they want to see the project succeed. It's very encouraging." ⁂

**Hudson Valley Wine and Grape Association**
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