
CULT OF TASTE

SEARCHING FOR FLAVOR

BY GERALDINE PLUENEKKE

*An international winemaker helps
Palmer find its groove.*

Miguel Martin moves through the vineyards tasting. He tests a cabernet franc grape, then a riesling, a chardonnay—throughout the autumn, every other day, every day, an exercise in vintages to come.

“I am looking for flavor, not sugar,” says the Madrid-born, 42-year-old winemaker who joined Palmer Vineyards in September. “Here in Long Island you harvest by flavor, by fruit-flavor development, instead of harvesting by full maturity or high alcohol.” Elsewhere, the timing of a harvest can be simpler, dictated by digital refractometers that measure the *brix*, or sugar content, of grapes.

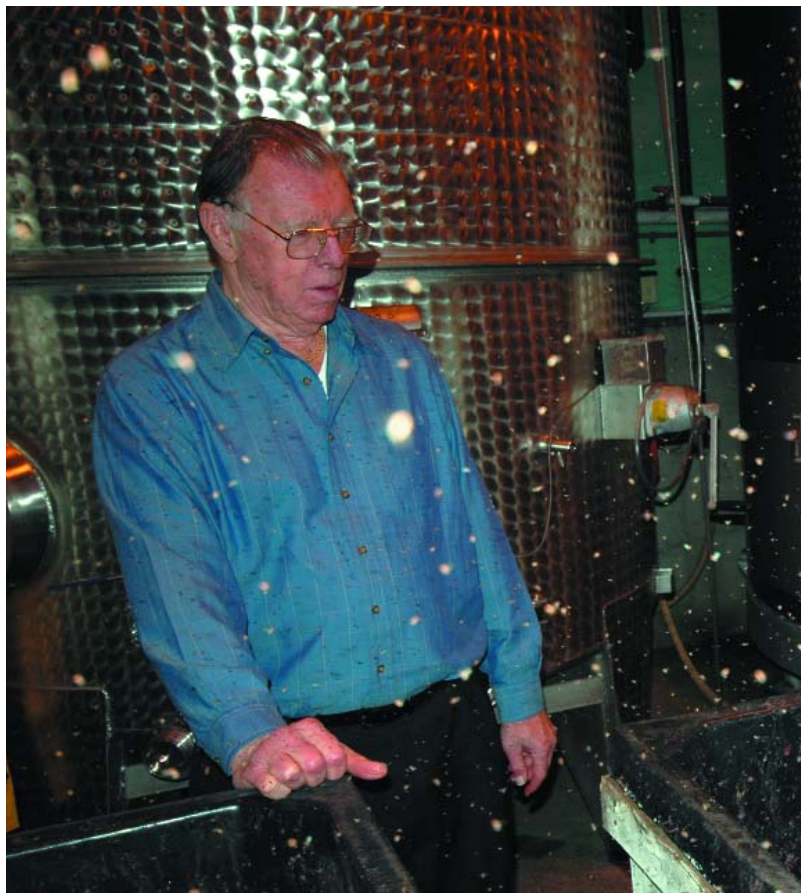
He tastes, he inspects, he “communicates” with the vineyard. “The vines,” he says, “they are happy, or they are sad, healthy or sick. Depending upon what I see, I think it is time to pick or I think the vines are healthy and I can let the cluster grapes hang longer.” At some point, fruit reaches maximum potential, depending upon the year and threatening storms or sliding temperatures. “You see the weather coming, the frost coming, the leaves dropping from the vines. Then you know you are not going to get anything else just by leaving the vines longer.”

The new winemaker trained in Spain, California, Australia and Chile—all balmy Mediterranean climates that don’t contend with the slings and arrows of meteorological fortune we enjoy on the Eastern seaboard; what imprimatur he will make on Palmer Vineyards, and how his absorption with fruit-flavor development will pay off, is arousing quiet speculation. “I would like to have more low yield, to basically enhance the wines that we are producing—little by little,” he says softly.

Behind the words, you sense confidence. Martin is the latest of a growing corps of international winemakers to hire on in the East End. He is actually returning. In 1988, Martin spent two years at Southampton’s LeReve (now Duckwalk) Winery where he met his future wife, Ellen.

For Robert Palmer, president of Palmer Vineyards (which he planted in 1983) and president of the Long Island Wine Council, this is a year of change. Last December 22, he sold his New York-based advertising agency, R.J. Palmer, Inc., to his employees. “I have a new winemaker, new vineyard manager, new staff in back, have changed a number of distributors, and have a game plan that involves me a lot.” He says this looking knowingly at Martin, as the two inspect several tanks of cabernet sauvignon grapes simmering on their juice just a week or so after harvest. The winery’s air is thick with carbon dioxide, the aroma of wine coming to life.

It wasn’t long ago that Palmer pushed for higher tonnage because he wanted volume. “Now I think our future is in a little less volume and much higher-quality, fruit-driven wine.” Currently, Palmer Vineyards produces 19,000 cases of wine a year from 60 acres of vines in



Above: Surrounded by swarming fruit flies, common visitors around harvest time, winemaker Miguel Martin stirs fermenting cabernet sauvignon, with owner Robert Palmer standing by.

Aquebogue, as well as another 60 acres, some newly planted, in Cutchogue. Aquebogue focuses on quality; Cutchogue, more on volume. Recently, Palmer, who made money in Florida real estate, put his Cutchogue vineyard on the market for a non-negotiable \$6 million, adding, “Down deep I don’t want to sell it.” Should a deal happen—it hasn’t yet drawn one inquiry—he would invest proceeds into increasing quality at Aquebogue.

The River Café in Dumbo has long preferred Palmer Vineyards when it comes to Long Island wine. Wine director Joseph Delissio says of the Reserve Chardonnay, “Palmer is consistent—and Long Island is a region that tends to be inconsistent. That consistency gives us confidence that when we serve that wine it will be well received. Over 60% of the River Café clientele is tourists, so it’s always fun and interesting when someone tells us they want to try something local. So far people have been pleasantly surprised at the quality New York State can produce.”

Long Island is a wine region in transition. It has grown to more than 30 wineries in just over 25 years on plum-y merlots and whites that range from crisp to lush and complex.

There is what it is not. “We’re not Burgundy, we’re not Bordeaux, we’re not upstate New York,” says Palmer of frequent comparisons. Adds Martin, “We’re obviously never going to get a 14.5 percent alcohol cabernet or shiraz that you probably get in California every year. Vines don’t get enough sunshine and heat for full maturity like you would get in Spain, Portugal, Italy, California. The weather plays such

Photograph: Stephen Munshin



a big issue here. And that's perfect. It's not even a consideration in California."

There is what it is. "We are just beginning to understand what we do very well and figure out how to make the best wines out of what we grow very well. We have our own peculiar climate out here that's going to produce a product that's unique," says Palmer. Over the past 15 or 20 years, numerical scores for Palmer and its East End peers ranked by wine magazines like the *Wine Spectator* and *Wine Advocate* have nestled in the respectable 80s, mostly mid- to high-80s, and an occasional outstanding 90.

"We jumped on the merlot bandwagon, because," Palmer's voice lifts, "it *grew* well. It became our signature. The island makes some good merlots, some really terrific merlots. But we're learning that we can grow a *heck* of a sauvignon blanc, a pinot blanc, a riesling. I think we *really* underestimate ourselves in our riesling-growing ability, and gewurztraminers. Now we're in that next phase, which is learning how to turn [this] into world class wines."

To put such wines on the world's tables, it's essential the island's wineries work together as a region, Martin says. Until last July he worked for Gonzales Byass in Spain, creating wines designed to compete with New World offerings from New Zealand, Australia, Argentina and Chile. But the growing popularity of Spanish wines around the world, he says, also depended on collective promotion and shared efforts to do things better.

When Palmer Vineyard planted its first vines off Route 48 in Aquebogue, it followed planting maps for Napa Valley, letting vines grow too high and draping over. "California growers do that to keep the sun off the grapes," explains Palmer. The vineyard quickly

switched. Northeast grapes need maximum sun. "Miguel said the other day, 'And you're still doing it wrong.'" For instance, in some places, Palmer's vines crisscross. Where two vines cross, some leaves shade others, cheating them of sunlight. Now vines will rise separately, increasing the amount of flavor-developing photosynthesis the plants receive, grape clusters will be thinned, leaves pulled for a smaller yield of higher-quality grapes.

In another example, Martin points to cabernet sauvignon, a grape that often doesn't ripen to its full potential in our climate, particularly during this past summer with its many "chilly" nights. But he's confident that better pruning and better placement on the vineyard's mile of fields stretching from Sound Avenue to the Sound can produce more years of fully ripened cabernet sauvignon.

"Today chardonnay is king at Palmer," says Martin. Robert Palmer's favorite wine is Gewurztraminer, and in reds he considers blends (such as the franc-merlot-cabernet sauvignon he makes under a private label for Gallagher's Steak Houses) the future.

Bystanders are curious how Martin will blend waiting 2005 wines, which include a very small quantity of reds. Last year, nature taunted the vineyard. Almost all its 2005 reds were devastated by rains, excepting for one low-lying field of Palmer's favorite red, cabernet franc, that was devastated by other means. Visiting the field with his winemaker, the tall vineyard owner recalled mournfully, "The franc looked great. The next day it was under four feet of water. A small lake nearby had flooded."

Nature balances cruelties with beneficence sometimes, as it did with bountiful harvests of 2004 reds and the 2006 crop that some are calling superior a year or two before it will be released. "We bring most of our product to market earlier than we'd like because we run out," says Palmer, "But we still have an enormous amount of '04s. It's great. Wines of '04 are going to have that extra year I've always wished I'd had."

Blending—one of Martin's joys—requires proportion, balance, and the storied bag of magic. He'll age the reds with a shade of oak, but hasn't decided for how long. Quickly, the discussion becomes esoteric and his thoughts return to the vines, like any good cook who focuses most on how he can get the best raw ingredients. "My ultimate goal is to choose which vineyards and which blocks within a vineyard are more suitable for a particular wine." Now he's taking notes for a form of musical vineyards in which he will shift vines to the locations he considers ideal. Such a prospect will take years, but Martin seems to be a patient man.

"When I interviewed him, Miguel asked 'where did I want to take the winery?'" recalls Palmer. "I said I want to be considered *the* number one wine premium producer in the region. A few others want to be that. A couple are right now."

And Miguel? "To truly find the vital character in each and every wine that we produce," he says. "I want a flavor that is truly a sauvignon, truly gewurztraminer, truly riesling, truly chardonnay. That's what I'm going after." □

Long Island is more suited to producing subtler, Bordeaux-style wine—wine that makes a less dramatic first impression but evolves in the glass, layer by layer.