

Life

The fruits of their labor

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Ben Feder never expected his first vintage wine, produced in 1977 at his vineyard in Clinton Corners, to cause a traffic jam.

But that is basically what it did with the help of noted wine columnist Frank Prial, who declared in a "little squib" in The New York Times that Feder's Seyval Blanc was the "best white wine produced in the Eastern United States."

After the public digested those words, Feder saw 300 cases of the stuff disappear before his eyes.

"On Friday of that week, we had so many cars in the driveway," he said, "that we could only sell a maximum of two bottles to each."

Feder's life as a vintner continues to go well. Wines from his estate have won awards and they've been served at some of New York's finest restaurants as well as the White House. Feder's wife, Phyllis, even poured them for President Bill Clinton and his Russian counterpart Boris Yeltsin during their 1995 summit meeting in Hyde Park.

"I had to get clearance from the Secret Service," she said.

The historic occasion is chronicled on a wall at the entrance of the Clinton Vineyards tasting room — a photo of the two leaders bursting in laughter — along with numerous other images of public figures, including several of New York Sen. Hillary Clinton, President-elect Barack Obama's nominee for secretary of state.

Wines, including the couple's 30th anniversary Seyval Blanc 2007, a variety of champagnes and dessert wines are on display. In prominent view is the vineyard's black-currant Cassis, which won gold medals and "Best of Class" at the Los Angeles International wine competition, the only U.S. winery to achieve those honors.

Although success came quickly to the vineyard, Feder's decision to grow and process grapes into wine took a bit longer. The vintner, now 86, purchased his rolling property of more than 100 acres in 1969, the year of the Woodstock music festival, as he likes to tell listeners. At the time, though, he lived in New York City where he worked as a graphic designer, spending only weekends at his Clinton Corners home. When a local farmer offered to care for the property in exchange for his pasturing his 36 head of Angus, Feder agreed. Later, Feder acquired the herd as pay-back for a debt owed him by the farmer.

"Suddenly, this boy from the Bronx had 36 Black Angus cattle," he said. "To make it short, they didn't really care for me, and I didn't care for them."

What he did care for was agriculture and esthetics, which he determined could be combined through wine-making. So the cattle were out, and the grapes were in with help from the state's 1976 Farm Winery Act, for which Feder and other area vintners lobbied then Gov. Hugh Carey. The law allowed wineries to sell directly to consumers and liquor stores rather than distributors and wholesalers. That meant more profitability for Feder from the 15 acres he planted in 1974 and the following year in grape vines.

Another element appealed to him, especially since his home is located on the property.

"A vineyard is visually, a very attractive site, I think," he said, and the view is visible from the tasting room, above the champagne cellar. Rows of vines on a rolling hill form a backdrop for a small pond where a pair of ducks, Arthur and Spanky, like to hang out.

Feder found a person of like mind when he married his wife, Phyllis, a dozen years after his first vintage and nine years after he started making sparkling wine. The dessert wines came into being long after they wed, with experimentation beginning about six years ago.

Like her husband, Phyllis Feder has a great interest in the state's wine industry. She is a director of the New York Wine and Grape Foundation, as well as its former chair. She also serves on the board of the proposed Wine and Culinary Center, intended for a site in the Hudson Valley.

She is in charge of promotion at Clinton Vineyards, including marketing and product-development, while her husband concentrates on wine-making. Both pay attention to the business' esthetics. In addition, five years ago they hired a general manager, Chris Stuart, who had worked in the area as a chef.

As much as Ben Feder seems to enjoy sharing the history of Clinton Vineyards, he becomes even more passionate while discussing wine-making. A tour from

the tasting room to the adjacent winery revealed not only huge stainless-steel vats but architecture of an earlier era, fitting for a winery that uses methods passed down through the centuries.

"This is a barn that was built in 1790," Feder said. "Look how square it is."

A cool side cellar, kept between 32 to 42 degrees Fahrenheit, revealed sparkling wine going through a process called "disgorging," the releasing of yeast from the necks of bottles to which a special recipe of brandy, sugar and aged wine was then added. From there the bottles were placed in a machine called, for obvious reasons, a "corker."

"There's 32 lbs. of pressure per square-inch in there," Feder said, so the vintner must take care to stay clear of the cork before placing a wire neck atop it and securing it by machine. Afterward each bottle receives, by hand, a foil wrap around its neck and a label.

"The whole process is called 'Methode Champenoise,' (the French method)" Feder said. "There's nothing new here. All the machines are old except for the corker."

That method also includes the first fermentation in steel vats. The second takes place in bottles purposely thick to contain the pressure within. Those bottles are capped and placed in a cool cellar where they are allowed to slowly ferment.

"If you put in too much sugar, it will blow up the bottle," Feder said. "When the sugar ferments, we put a little bit of yeast in there, too. That gives champagne the flavor — the dead yeast."

In his vineyard's cellar, he raised a bottle, turned it upside-down and held it up to the light.

"Look at this. Look at this," he said, excitedly.

Yeast swirled about, much like a scene in a Christmas snow globe.

In a process called riddling, Feder said, each bottle is placed at an angle in a holder and given a quarter-turn daily until the liquid becomes clear and dead yeast cells are forced into the neck. At the appropriate time, the bottle is disgorged.

Feder learned the time-honored technique of champagne-making in the region that made the bubbly stuff famous, Champagne, France.

"In the place I learned, the room was 5 miles long," he said, and all the wine was turned by hand. Some wineries, he said, computerize the process today.

Feder said even the oak-riddling racks he uses for his sparkling wine are all from France. Even so, the authentic, natural methods he employs do not necessarily endear him to certain people within the champagne-making world of France. The sticking point is an important word.

"Every year I get a call from the French Consulate in New York," Feder said. "They want us to take the word 'Champagne' off the label."

But Feder — who has yet to receive a call this year — said he's using it legally, and the appellation remains. Of the 750 to 2,200 cases of wine produced yearly at Clinton Vineyards, depending upon weather and other factors, Feder said from 500 to 700 cases typically are champagne.

He said wine-making is fun. But there are challenges.

"The rule of thumb in the wine business is you can handle 15 acres with two people," he said. "It's a lot of work, believe me."

That rule doesn't necessarily mean the two people can do everything themselves. Another challenge, Feder said, is hiring vineyard workers.

"First of all, a lot of young people are not interested in this kind of work," he said. "They'll do the drinking and tasting, but ..."

Immigrants are good workers, he said, but today the onus of their legal status is on their employer. "Now it's my liability," he said. "I have to see that the papers are valid."

Most often, he said, students from the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park take on the task, and the work gets done.

The Feders take pride in their winery, pride that goes beyond the spirits themselves.

"As a small winery, we're very creative in doing this," Phyllis Feder said, "and Ben, as a designer, his packaging is gorgeous."

Then there are the elements that come from the outside.

"The joy for me is watching people smile and say, 'Ooooh! Wonderful!' when they taste my wine," she said, "and to have people return."

Phyllis Feder, herself, is a close-by returnee. She said she adores champagne, and Clinton Vineyards makes four varieties, Seyval Naturel, Peach Gala, Jubilee and Royale. She will help ring in the New Year with either of the latter to which a splash of award-winning black-currant Cassis will be added.

"Absolutely," she said. "I'm going to be drinking Kir Royale. I will only be drinking champagne."

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