

Jul-1984

## Guest Opinion: The Wines of New England

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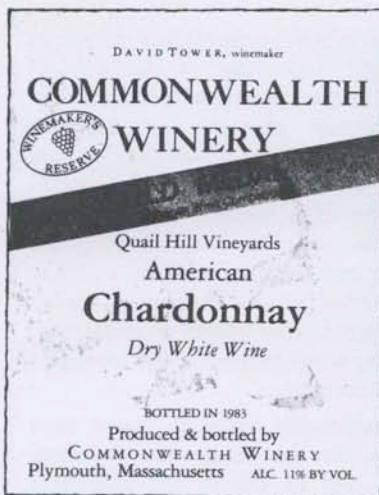
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### Recommended Citation

Apstein, Michael (1984). Guest Opinion: The Wines of New England. *Bridgewater Review*, 2(3), 2.  
Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol2/iss3/4](http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol2/iss3/4)

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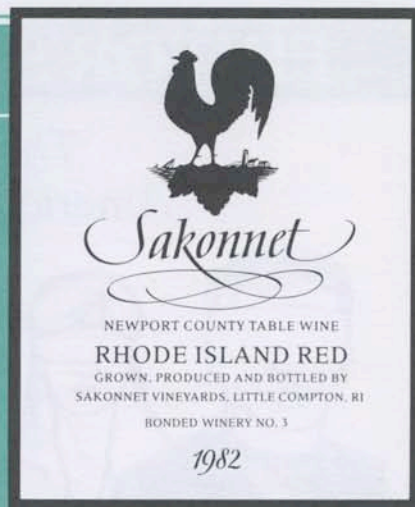




## GUEST OPINION

### The Wines of New England

by Michael Apstein



Martha's Vineyard is known for secluded beaches, quaint towns and summer vacations. Despite its name, few connect it with wine, unless, of course, you are lucky enough to be familiar with Heitz Cellars' sought-after Martha's Vineyard California Cabernet. In fact, there is a vineyard on the Vineyard as well as nine others here in New England: three each in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut, and one in New Hampshire. It should come as no surprise that grapes for wine are grown in these parts, since upstate New York was the first major wine-making area in the U.S. In fact, the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms is soon planning to designate southeastern New England as an official wine-growing region.

Most New England wineries use both traditional European grapes (*vitis vinifera*) such as chardonnay, reisling and cabernet sauvignon, and what are known here as French hybrids. These are grape varieties developed about one hundred years ago in France (where they are still used but called "American" hybrids) as a way to combat the vine-destroying root louse, phylloxera. These newer breeds of vines combine the elegance of the traditional *vinifera* with the heartiness of the American roots and at the same time eliminate the undesirable strong, grapy or "foxy" quality inherent in native American grapes.

These new hybrids were originally given names like Seibel 5279 or Seyve-Villard 5276, perhaps a botanist's dream, but certainly not designed to lure the average consumer. So the names were changed to the more marketable Seyval Blanc or Vidal Blanc.

The New England wineries are all small operations. Commonwealth Winery in Plymouth, Mass., for example, produced 12,000 cases last year. In comparison, Chateau Lafitte Rothschild produces 25,000 cases a year, and many of the California wine makers produce as many as 500,000.

Commonwealth owns no vineyards itself, relying instead on grapes purchased from vineyards in New Hampshire, New York and Massachusetts. David Tower, who owns Commonwealth, oversees the grape growing at many of these vineyards.

Commonwealth's production is split 50-50 between the *vinifera* and hybrids. Of the latter, Tower says, "I'm not trying to make a \$30-a-bottle wine -- these are perfectly delightful varieties for the mid-priced (\$5-\$7 a bottle) range." However, Commonwealth's best wines are the *viniferas*, the Chardonnay and Reisling. Tower's "1983 bottling" Quail Hill Vineyard American Chardonnay won a gold medal at the First American Wine Competition held at the Culinary Institute of America in New York. Of the nineteen Chardonnays which won medals, sixteen were California; Tower's was the only one from the East. This year there is not enough Quail Hill Vineyard Chardonnay to be bottled separately, so it will be combined with Chardonnay from a Massachusetts vineyard, Stone Gate, and labeled with both names: Stone Gate-Quail Hill Vineyard American Chardonnay.

Even though Commonwealth's wines are made from grapes grown and harvested in a single year, their labels cannot legally include a vintage year. A wine label which carries a vintage year is generally an indication of quality; thus a wine labelled "1982 Bordeaux" will probably be superior to one simply labeled "Bordeaux." However, a U.S. wine labelling law requires that eighty-five percent of the grapes in a vintage-dated wine come from the state in which the wine was made. Since a large portion of Commonwealth's grapes are grown in New York, its labels can bear the notation "bottled in 1983" but not simply "1983."

A visit to the Sakonnet vineyards in Little Compton, Rhode Island, provides a

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wonderful lesson in grape growing and wine making. Jim and Lolly Mitchell have forty-five acres of neatly pruned vines of all varieties. Since the different varieties mature at slightly different times, you can see the vines and grapes in various stages of development. With their own acreage and another fifteen acres which they manage, the Mitchells need not rely on out-of-state grapes; hence their wines carry a vintage date and some say "estate bottled," signifying that they come exclusively from Sakonnet's own grapes. From an initial output of 4,000 cases in 1975, their first year, Sakonnet's production has grown to 10,000 cases last year. Half the vineyards are currently planted with *vinifera* and half with hybrids. Like Commonwealth, Sakonnet uses the hybrids to make both varietal and generic wines. These are distinguished by the fact that varietals carry the names of the grapes from which they are produced, such as Vidal Blanc, while the generics, which are made from a combination of several grapes have imaginative names like "Spinnaker" and "America's Cup White."

Chicama Vineyards, on the Vineyard, grows only *vinifera* -- merlot, cabernet sauvignon, and gewurztraminer -- on its thirty-five acres. In addition, the owners, George and Cathy Mathiesen, buy carefully selected grapes from California to produce a Zinfandel, Chenin Blanc and Ruby Cabernet. In size, Chicama is what Californians call a "boutique" operation, producing about 6,000 cases a year. The Mathiesens have started making the region's first sparkling wine, called Sea Mist, using both the traditional champagne method, and the traditional grapes of Champagne, the chardonnay and pinot noir.

The public is encouraged to visit these wineries for a tour and tasting. Since they are all small operations, an advance phone call to check on visiting hours is advisable. ■