

A Tale of Two Peninsulas



MICHIGAN'S LEELANAU PENINSULA AND OLD MISSION PENINSULA ARE TWIN AVAS WITH SURPRISING DIVERSITY

by David Furer

DISCOVERING A WINE REGION SOMETIMES TAKES the form of piggybacking vineyard and winery visits onto an event to which one is invited. It was an annual gathering of Michigan's wine communicators, corralled by the Leelanau Peninsula Wine Trail (LPWT) that allowed for my first work-related visit. Having motorcycled the entirety of Lake Michigan in 1996, when living in Chicago, I had fond memories of the state's woodlands and meadows, farms at which could be found cherry orchards and the occasional vineyard. Round about that time there was a mini-boom of interest in developing the cherry sector for distilling, though quality wine production was still gestating.

Michigan's second AVA, dating to 1982, is Leelanau Peninsula, encompassing all of Leelanau County. Its neighboring AVA, Old Mission Peninsula, was established in 1987, in great part due to the efforts of the venerable Ed O'Keefe of Chateau Grand Traverse, the area's big dog winery for its combination of age, quality, size and diversity. Michigan's largest producer is Leelanau Wine Cellars, working with 110 acres of its own, but through its size and strategy often acquiring tons of grapes from throughout the state. "When you have a growing wine region with more buyers than sellers, there's always someone willing to pay a dollar more," says owner Bob Jacobson. Jacobson makes many wines; his new Sauvignon Blanc, culled from an acre owned by his family, was brisk, varietally correct and immensely refreshing, even on an unseasonably chilly late April afternoon.

The twin AVAs' elevations run between 600 and 1,200 feet, with a surprising diversity of soil types based upon glacial moraine with striated variations—clays of various colors, silica, sandy loam, gravel and pulses of granite and limestone. With nearly 2,600 growing hours, "our diurnal swings are often as wide as 30 degrees," according to winemaker Adam Satchwell of Shady Lane, "and we have an hour more sunlight in July than other, more southerly U.S. wine regions." His two acres of Riesling upon calcium-rich sand yielded a very good, dry 2012 release, with a complex nose of lanolin, flowers and lime with a clean and ripe finish.

The region's main town, Traverse City, is quite the foodie

destination, with Mario Batali and comedian Tim Allen summering here, along with native rockers Mark Farner and Bob Seger. Dinner at its Trattoria Stella with the LPWT's Lorri Hathaway and Lee Lutes, owner of Black Star Farms, consisted of mixed offal from pig, lamb and cow, accompanied by an aromatic 2012 Brengman Brothers Gewurztraminer served by co-owner Amanda Danielson, an Advanced Level somm currently studying for her Master's exam. 2012 was a very ripe, late-harvested year yielding many of the best wines the areas have produced. "We celebrate vintage variation here; in the better vintages you'll recognize differences vaster than you would on the West Coast" says Lutes. "For some it's problematic, but I like to think it's part of wines' pleasure." A later tasting with Lutes showed several great wines, including two from 2012 under his Arcturos brand: a lees-stirred Pinot Gris with extended skin contact, sporting brisk minerality and a longish finish, and an unoaked Chardonnay subjected to lots of lees stirring; layered and with an alluring finish, it's a terrific value at \$16.

But LP/OMP isn't only about still wines. Arguably the state's most famous winemaker is Larry Mawby, who makes wines under the L. Mawby label. The sparkling wine stalwart's top wine is Mille; the 2005 vintage of this méthode champenoise is a delicious bubbly from 100 percent Chardonnay, both smelling and tasting creamy, long-ending and worth the \$50.

Pinot Noirs from LP's Bel Lago and OMP's Chateau Chantal, a 2010 Dijon Clone Reserve and a 2011 respectively, showed the diversity of flavor and style this northerly location offers; Bel Lago's release is brooding and chewy as befits the clone, with high-toned spicy notes on the finish; by contrast, the Chantal emphasizes elegance and poise. A pink version from newcomer Verterra was the best rosé I tried in Leelanau.

And odder offerings can also be found. The aforementioned Shady Lane and Black Star Farms just began working with Grüner Veltliner, while the flagship wine from Tony Ciccone of Ciccone Vineyard & Winery, with help from daughter Paula, is a Dolcetto—the only planting in the state. **\$**

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Dynamic Duo

THE COUPLE BEHIND HILLIARD BRUCE MAKE MUSIC FROM GRAPES IN THE STA. RITA HILLS AVA



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John Hilliard and Christine Bruce at home.

Career highlights: 1981-1992:

Christine Bruce worked as a professional keyboardist for various pop bands. **1992-2001:**

John Hilliard managed a successful shipyard business on Brady Island in Houston, TX. Previously he was a visual artist and served on the Cultural Arts Foundation of Houston and Diverseworks Houston. **1994:**

Christine founded HB Arabians, a breeding operation for Arabian horses. **2002:** Together, Christine and John purchased the 101-acre Hilliard Bruce property.

2004: Planted 15.7 acres of Pinot Noir and 5.3 acres of Chardonnay. **2007-2010:** Began producing wines while also studying winemaking at U.C.

Davis Extension Program, Allan Hancock Viticulture and Enology Program, and Grayson County College Viticulture and Enology Program. Present: Christine specializes in Chardonnay production, while John focuses on Pinot Noir.

ALONG THE EAST-WEST VALLEY

corridor of California's Sta. Rita Hills AVA, just off Route 246, at the gateway to the west end of the AVA, sits Hilliard Bruce. The area is one of the coolest parts of an already cool region, with summer highs typically only reaching into the 80s. Owners and winemakers John Hilliard and Christine Bruce produce gorgeous wines, of concentrated fruit character backed by superb acid structure. They learned how to make wine from the Prince of Pinot, Paul Lato, and today work closely with Jeff Newton and Ben Merz to manage their vineyards. By 2008, the transition from organic farming to SIP sustainable viticulture was complete, and as of 2014 they have completed construction of a new, state-of-the-art LEED-certified winery. I spoke with John Hilliard about the couple's vision.

Q: Jonathan Cristaldi: How did Hilliard Bruce come about?

John Hilliard: We lived in Texas, where frosts, acid-destroying heat, summer and fall rains and impending Pierce's disease make grape growing quite difficult. So we fled and purchased 101 acres in Santa Barbara.

Q: Was there a wine that influenced your palate so much so that you were hoping to emulate it?

The wines that influenced us are the successful Burgundy vintages. You don't learn much from failed Burgundy, such as the 1994 DRC La Tâche. But their successes teach your palate about the balance and texture of wine.

Q: What is special about the Sta. Rita Hills AVA?

From Hilliard Bruce, it is all downhill to the

marshes where the Santa Ynez River empties into the Pacific Ocean. The air resting on the surface of the 50-something-degree Pacific is drawn inland when the interior valleys heat up, and temps rise into the 90s and 100s. We get so much wind as a result that we have to run wind blocks down vine rows. Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes love cool, as it extends the time it takes to ripen, which allows the grapes to develop complex flavors. Fast ripening means monotonous flavors.

Q: Which clones did you plant in your vineyards?

Our largest planting is Calera. We chose this field selection after consulting with Tom Prentice of Crop Care. Tom had discussions with Steve Kistler concerning which clones delivered the most complexity, and made the recommendation to me. Calera has a meaty character, more so in my soils than the Dijon clones such as 667 and 777. Tom also recommended the 76 and 96 Chardonnay, which have been beautiful. We had 115, 667, 777 and one particular 828, which was a recommendation from Ryan Carr. I grafted it over the 828 to Chardonnay because the 828 I had lacked aroma and complexity in the glass.

Q: What foods do you like to pair with your own Chardonnays and Pinots?

Our wines are food wines. I want seafood soups for our Chardonnay and Italian-style dishes for the Pinot Noirs.

Current vintages of Hilliard Bruce retail between \$30 and \$70 and are available via their website, www.hilliardbruce.com, as well as through distributors in New York, New Jersey and Florida with Texas to follow. SJ

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