

# Portland Press Herald

## Can blueberry wines with bubbles give Maine farmers a meaningful outlet for sales?

A pair of winemakers with Maine roots hope so.

By Mary Pols

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Long ago, at a bachelor party on a cold and rainy weekend at Moosehead Lake, Michael Terrien, Eric Martin and their group of friends did enough drinking to get down to their last bottle of alcohol. It was blueberry wine, and even to a bunch of guys whose palates were, at that point, far from pristine, it was notable.

Martin remembers the general response being, “Oh my God, this is terrible.”

They drank it anyway.

But Terrien, whom Martin had known since they were at Waynflete School in 4th and 5th grade respectively, said something Martin also remembers: “There has got to be a way to make a totally amazing blueberry wine,” Martin said. “And here we are, 20 years later.”

Since 2012, Terrien, a California-based vintner with an international reputation, and Martin, a writer who works in fiction and on documentary films, based in North Carolina, have been making very small batches of a sparkling wine made with fresh wild blueberries from Maine. They hit the market with Bluet in 2015, with a wine made in a method that mimics Champagne. Each year since, they’d sold out their Bluet methode champenoise well before the bottles are ready every year, all within the state. The annual production is small, no more than 250 cases, and they always end up with a waiting list.

This year they added a second Bluet to the lineup, another sparkling wine with a similarly low alcohol content of about 7 percent, but made instead in the style

of prosecco and dubbed Bluet charmat. It’s cheaper (about \$20 a bottle, compared to \$30 for the method champenoise), less labor intensive and thus easier to scale up and take out on the national marketplace. In October, they started selling Bluet charmat in Boston, New York and California. Next year they hope to make the leap to selling 2,000 cases. “And the year after that, 5,000,” Martin said.

In their dreams, this is the product that could potentially save the ailing wild blueberry business, which is at the breaking point. Farmers in 2017 received an average of 26 cents a pound for the tiny, sweet berries, the lowest price in more than 30 years. If the Bluet charmat succeeds, they figure, maybe that will lead the way to encourage other wine makers to make bubbly wines with wild blueberries. It might take 20 years. But if it took off, could it be a profitable outlet for one of Maine’s great natural resources?

### THIS MAY SOUND CRAZY

Terrien spells out the numbers from a Napa perspective (that’s where his Terrien Wines is based). The rule of thumb, he says, is that a bottle of wine costs about a hundredth of a ton of grapes. “Napa Cabernet sells for \$60 and a ton of Cabernet grapes costs \$6,000,” he said. The first ton of blueberries he and Martin bought, back in 2012, cost them \$1,000. (Given the per pound price, today it would be less.)

By the Napa equation, in theory a bottle could sell for \$10. But only if the maker had scaled up enough, Terrien explained. When they did back-of-the-envelope calculations on scaling up the champenoise Bluet, it was far less practical; they’d have to charge too much

because of the labor involved, including regularly turning the bottles as they morph into wine. Every bottle takes about 2 pounds of wild blueberries to make.

In 2017, 39,000 tons of Napa Cabernet were harvested, Terrien said, versus 34,000 tons of Maine wild blueberries. If things really took off in the wild blueberry wine department, the whole crop could go to alcoholic beverages. In theory.

“We’re not in Napa and wild blueberries aren’t Cabernet,” Terrien said, “so this may sound crazy and probably is.”

But look what happened in recent years with hard cider sales, he points out. Even with fluctuations in the marketplace recently, sales have jumped 500 percent just since 2011, according to the United States Association of Cider Makers.

The proliferation of sparkling blueberry wine would be a welcome scenario for Nancy McBrady, executive director of the Wild Blueberry Commission. She advocates for Maine’s wild blueberries, and its growers, and since she started that job in 2015, she’s seen the industry rocked by falling prices, driven by competition with Canadian berries and by expansion of fields in both Maine and Canada that produced more supply than was needed for the demand.

The industry is always looking for value-added products to promote the berries. Maine already produces blueberry wines in small quantities – McBrady doesn’t have statistics on how much – and one producer, Bartlett Estate in Gouldsboro, has been making still blueberry wines since 1983.

“There is enormous potential for the Bluet product,” McBrady said. “It’s a really great marriage of an antioxidant, delicious and healthy product from Maine with a superior beverage.”

Both the charmat and the champagne method Bluet products are lovely, McBrady says. “And I think they are improving.”

Terrien and Martin admit it has been a steep learning curve to figure out the right approach to making the prosecco-style wine. Their early results were “pretty rough,” Terrien said. But they’ve worked out the kinks and will bottle their sixth batch in February in the 3,000 square foot facility in Scarborough. Terrien is there at least once a month, even in the winter, tasting and tweaking the formula.

“We are learning as we go,” Terrien said. “We’re making a better wine with each iteration.”

## BARREN TO BARN TO BOTTLE

The longtime friends are used to people thinking their wild blueberry wine quest is crazy. That first season they bought wild blueberries, in 2012, Terrien arrived at Ridgeberry Farm in Appleton in a rented minivan – Massachusetts plates and all – with his children (he has four) and wife, Hannah. They drove the minivan right into the middle of the blueberry barren.

“With all these teenaged pickers staring at us,” Terrien said.

Both men were eager to do something together – they’d both worked at Acacia Vineyard in California when they were in their 20s – and ideally, something that brought them back to Maine regularly.

“We are in love with Maine and our history together,” Terrien said. “And this opportunity seemed far better than making another chardonnay.”

He’d negotiated with the Boyington family, who own Ridgeberry Farm, for a ton at price of 80 cents a pound. Martin remembers the Boyingtons as being completely dubious. “They were like, ‘Are you sure you want to do that? What are you going to with these? I don’t think you know how much that is.’”

“John (Boyington) didn’t even talk to us until the second or third year,” Martin said. “And now they are like, ‘How much do you want next year?’” Tabitha Perry of Crush Distributors had been work-

ing with Terrien already, selling his wines to high-end restaurants like Hugo's, and she was on board for the blueberry wine from the get-go.

"Because I knew anything he would do would be good," Perry said.

As they moved into making the charmat version they started buying frozen berries from Todd Merrill of Merrill Blueberry Farms in Ellsworth. They work for the prosecco style, and possibly, could work in the champenoise as well. If all goes as planned, they'll start buying from other growers.

Their earliest experiments – in Terrien's uncle's barn in Jefferson – produced lots of purple stains and dubious batches. They've been determined to make a dry product, although some vendors and buyers lament the lack of sweetness in the Bluet. That's not Terrien's style. He wants to make a wine that pairs well with say, lobster dunked in butter. (In North Carolina, Martin likes to pair it with fried chicken.)

In California, he makes a dry chardonnay that's frequently compared to French burgundy, so stylistically, the Bluet fits in with the Terrien way.

Still, Perry encountered some raised eyebrows when she brought it to some of Maine's restaurants to sell. "Especially for some of our serious wine geek buyers," Perry said. "Some of the sommeliers, they kind of looked at it and thought, really?"

They tend to be surprised by the wine, she said. "The nose implies it is going to be jammy. But it's dry and that fruit jumps out of the glass and grabs you. It's not what they expect. In the right way."

On the flip side, Terrien said Bluet has taken a beating occasionally on social media because of how dry it is. Or because the wines don't taste enough like wild Maine blueberries.

Terrien counters that most people would never recognize a cabernet grape in the raw as having an obvious flavor connection to cabernet wines. He knows people love sugar. But he and Martin have high ambitions for these wines. "If we just added a bunch of sugar to this, we would never be able to break free of the highly regional market," Terrien said.

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