

Into the wild blue yonder

Bluet is a dry sparkling wine made entirely from wild Maine blueberries. As the weather warms up, look for Bluet appearances around Boston.

The Boston Globe

By Astrid Lium
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

A new wine is popping up around Boston and it contains an unexpected ingredient: blueberries.

Don't expect a syrupy Boones Farm throwback to the 1980s, though. This colorful libation, called Bluet (pronounced blu-it), is a dry sparkling wine made entirely from wild Maine blueberries, and it bears little resemblance to its sugary predecessors.

According to Bluet's co-creator Michael Terrien, "Local or regional fruit wine is generally going to be sweet, and this defies that."

The drink subverts expectations with one sip, especially for those anticipating the taste of blueberry pie. Terrien explains that this is because fermentation differs from baking, and the result is the essence of blueberry — a potent berry flavor without the sweet taste of sugar. This does not always go over well with tasters anticipating a flavor resembling their morning smoothie or favorite berry cobbler.

"A glass of pinot noir doesn't taste like the pinot noir grape," he says. "No one has had a pinot noir grape, and they don't know what it tastes like, but millions of people had blueberries for breakfast this morning."

The name is a nod to Thoreau, who called wild blueberries "bluets" and wrote of their "innocent ambrosial taste, as if made of the ether itself." Each bottle contains about two pounds of the antioxidant-rich superfood, transformed through fermentation into a bubbly beverage. It has a naturally low-alcohol content (8 percent ABV) and no added sugar.

Bluet is not intended to emulate traditional grape wine, but rather it is forging a unique identity and providing a fresh experience for wine drinkers. Although this tart beverage is currently considered a regional delicacy, that may change as it expands beyond its Maine roots.

Terrien points out that Burgundy, which started as a local wine made in the eastern region of France, has garnered international acclaim over the centuries and now demands premium prices halfway around the globe.

"Burgundy got a thousand-year head start and sells for crazy money in Hong Kong," he says. "We're not going to catch up anytime soon, but wild blueberries do really make a nice wine."

A seasoned winemaker based in Napa, Terrien collaborated with Eric Martin, his business partner and childhood friend now living in North Carolina, to make Bluet. They both grew up in Maine and met 40 years ago at Waynflete School in Portland. The duo maintained a lifelong friendship and created a reason to spend more time together in their native state.

"This started as a labor of love," says Martin. "Love of Maine, love of blueberries, love of our time there together growing up, our history there." They began experimenting with wild blueberries using méthode champenoise, or Champagne method, which requires a secondary fermentation in the bottle. The result is a creamy texture and complex flavor. This version of Bluet, which retails at \$30 per bottle, hit the market in 2015, sells out quickly every year, and is currently only available in Maine.

The Charmat method, made in the same style as Prosecco, has a brighter and more vivid berry aroma. The winemakers released their first batch of Charmat in 2018 and sell it across the country at a slightly more modest \$20 per bottle.

These days they travel to their production facility, based in Scarborough, Maine, on a monthly basis. From winnowing to fermenting and aging, Terrien and Martin constantly improve upon their process and refine their product.

"It's still growing, and the story is evolving so rapidly," Martin says. "The world has moved so quickly in expanding people's palates."

In recent months, another motivating factor to expand Bluet's reach has emerged. The gradual rise in the wine's production dovetails with the slump of the Maine blueberry industry.

In 10 years, from 2007 to 2017, the price of wild Maine blueberries dropped 75 percent, from \$1.07 to 26 cents per pound. Terrien and Martin aim to help boost regional blueberry sales with their product. The steep price drop has developed into a crisis and the winemakers believe that adding value could help in the long run if more wineries jump in and develop a market.

"It's a situation of friends wanting to do something good together, [and] it just feels right," Terrien says.

The naturally low-sugar beverage makes for a refreshing aperitif, a complementary pairing with lobster or charcuterie, or as an effervescent addition to a sweeter concoction. The winemakers recommend all three options, but acknowledge that colorful cocktails tend to be the most common use of the indigo elixir.

Kristie Ghee, the manager of The Boathouse in Kennebunkport, Maine, added Bluet to the menu last spring. She serves it by the glass (or Champagne flute) as well as in a popular drink called Night Moves — a fresh take on the gin and champagne classic French 75. The striking hue makes Bluet a conversation starter and head turner at The Boathouse bar.

"It moves through the dining room and catches people's eye," Ghee says. "It's so colorful!"

She recalls her skepticism when first trying Bluet, anticipating a cloying experience. "It's totally different from what people expect. It's a serious wine," Ghee says. "I was shocked it was so good."

As the weather warms up, look for Bluet appearances around Boston, including on the menus at Gaslight, Catalyst, and Beacon Hill Bistro.

Alyssa Champagne, a mixologist at Gaslight, served a cocktail with Bluet on an unseasonably warm February afternoon. While revelers celebrated on Gaslight's patio during the New England Patriots' Super Bowl victory parade, Champagne featured a drink appropriately called the Lombardi #6.

"Who knows if that name will stick, but we hope to serve more of that cocktail as the weather warms up," she says.

Joe McHale, the bar manager at Beacon Hill Bistro, is creating his own concoctions with creative monikers such as Black and Bluet and Tangled up in Bluet.

This spring, Café Gratitude, a California restaurant group specializing in natural, plant-based gourmet foods and beverages, will also introduce Bluet to its drink menu. www.bluet.me

Astrid Lium can be reached at astridlium@gmail.com.



TRY THESE COCKTAILS MADE WITH BLUET

THE LOMBARDI #6 (above)

1.5 ounces gin
½ ounce elderflower liqueur
½ ounce lemon juice
½ ounce simple syrup
1 ounce Bluet

Combine all ingredients except the Bluet in a cocktail shaker. Shake and strain over fresh ice. Top with Bluet.

BLACK AND BLUET (right)

6 ounces Bluet
Two blackberries
Mint leaf
Mint simple syrup
Basil sugar

Muddle the blackberries, a mint leaf and mint simple syrup (sugar) in a shaker. Drop a pinch of basil sugar into a flute glass. Pour the Bluet into your shaker. Gently pour all contents into your flute glass. Garnish with a mint leaf sprig.

TANGLED UP IN BLUET (below)

1 ounce Peychauds liqueur
3 ounces Putnam rye
½ ounce orange simple syrup
2 ounces Bluet

Add ice to a rocks glass tumbler.



Layer the Peychauds liqueur and the Putnam Rye over the ice. Drizzle the orange simple syrup over the ice. Pour the Bluet as a float on top. Garnish with fresh blueberries.

ASTRID LIUM



'A glass of pinot noir doesn't taste like the pinot noir grape. No one has had a pinot noir grape, and they don't know what it tastes like, but millions of people had blueberries for breakfast this morning.'

MICHAEL TERRIEN, co-creator of Bluet

