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From Wild Blueberries and Maine Terroir, Fine Sparkling Wine

It began as a lark among childhood friends, one a California winemaker. It has become a cultural exploration and, maybe, hope for an ailing industry.

By Eric Asimov
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APPLETON, Me. — Unless you have trained eyes, you could drive the narrow roads winding through the heart of coastal Maine’s wild-blueberry country and never realize you were surrounded by acres of blueberry vines. They slither along close to the ground, the narrow leaves as green as grass. A field of wild- blueberry vines resembles nothing so much as a vast lawn.

If you visit in late July as the berries near peak ripeness, you may spy a glint of blue here and there. Look closely, and troves of berries begin to reveal themselves, nearer to lavender than blue, and tinier than the more familiar plump high-bush berry that makes up most of the country’s blueberry crop. Wild blueberries are Maine’s bounty, the official state berry and a staple of roadside farm stands in the late summer. They are nutritious, tart, piquant and subtly complex. But there are problems: Because of competition, climate change and low commodity prices, farmers are not making enough money to sustain their businesses.

This situation has been more than disturbing to Michael Terrien, a California winemaker who lives in the city of Napa with his wife, Hannah Henry, and four children.

Mr. Terrien’s connection to wild blueberries is deep. He grew up in Cape Elizabeth, Me., just southeast of Portland, not far from blueberry territory, a narrow band that stretches northeast along the coast from southern Maine through far eastern Canada. Mr. Terrien, 51, has been making wine in Northern

California for more than 20 years, with experience at Acacia and Hanzell. Now he makes lively chardonnays and pinot noirs under his own label, Terrien, as well as perfumed pinot noirs from the Santa Cruz Mountains under the U.S. Grant label, and a variety of wines at Obsidian Ridge Vineyard in Lake County.



Greta Rybus

For the last five years, Mr. Terrien and Ms. Henry, along with Mr. Terrien’s childhood friend Eric

Martin, and Mr. Martin's wife, Meredith McMonigle, have been making Bluet, a sparkling wine of wild blueberries with nothing added but yeast for fermentation.

They make two styles: One, in tiny amounts, is made using the same method as Champagne, producing first a still wine and then refermenting it in a bottle to produce bubbles. The other, made in larger quantities, is produced like most Proseccos, carbonated in bulk in a pressurized tank.



Greta Rybus

Bluet's most recent version of the Prosecco-style wine, bottled with a screw cap, smelled like violets, roses and, yes, blueberries. It was exuberant yet dry and savory, and, at 7 percent alcohol, deliciously easy to drink.

The bottle-fermented wine, packaged like Champagne in a cork-topped bottle, is more contemplative. The 2017 was deeper, subtler, lightly savory and quietly complex. It, too, was about 7 percent alcohol, near the upper limit for blueberry wines. The two bottles made me wonder, why has this never been done before?

For as long as humans have cultivated fruit, they have made some form of fruit wine. Fermentation is really just another form of preservation, after all, creating a tasty and intoxicating alternative to jams, pickles and other sometimes desperate efforts to conserve every last bit of summer's abundance.

Grapes, it happens, have the perfect ratio of sugar to acid, along with other elements that over time have come to represent the ideal source of table wine.

Apples and pears can make wonderful cider, which is really another name for wine. Take another step and distill the wines, and you have an entirely different set of distinctive preserved fruits in the form of brandy, eau de vie, slivovitz and so on.

Beautiful beverages have been made from cranberries, loganberries, blackberries and even Douglas fir buds. Blueberries? Other efforts I've tasted have been cloying and syrupy, better for pancakes than for drinking.

It was one such experience that indirectly led to Bluet (pronounced the Maine way, BLUE-ett). Mr. Terrien and Mr. Martin were attending a bachelor party in Maine in the late 1990s, and were served a blueberry wine.

"It was so sweet, we couldn't drink it," Mr. Martin recalled. "Michael said there had to be a way to make better blueberry wine than this."

Though called wild blueberries, the fruit is cultivated. Farmers sell primarily to big processors who freeze the berries and sell them for industrial uses, like blueberry-muffin mix. Unlike the high-bush berries, which have been bred and modified to enhance particular traits, wild blueberries have not been altered.

The notion of blueberry wine arose again after Mr. Terrien and Ms. Henry were married in 2000 in a barn belonging to Mr. Terrien's aunt and uncle in Jefferson, Me., just a few miles southwest of Appleton. Everything for the reception — the lobsters, the vegetables, the desserts — had come from Maine, except the wine, because there were no good Maine wines.

“It was the missing piece, and one of the first times we thought seriously about it,” Mr. Terrien said.

It took a while for the project to coalesce. Mr. Martin, a novelist who also works in nonprofit organizations, lives in Durham, N.C. Each summer, the families would converge in Maine, and during these interludes they would experiment with wild-blueberry beverages.

“Playing around confirmed we could make something we would like to drink,” Mr. Terrien said. Why sparkling wine? I tasted a still blueberry wine from the 2018 vintage destined to be refermented in bottles. It smelled of blueberries and was dry, but something was missing.

This deficiency might cause a producer to add sugar, as in sweet commercial fruit wines, or to doctor a mediocre chardonnay with oak flavors. But Mr. Terrien was determined to make a wine that expressed the spirit of the fruit and the place.

“The purity of this fruit, growing in this place 10,000 years since the glaciers receded, has more right to be turned into wine than pinot noir,” he said. “It’s a cultural dance between fruit and people. It’s been here forever, and people have done nothing with it!”

He thought of Champagne, which, before the climate began to warm, was made in a marginal environment where the grapes would barely ripen most years. A still Champagne, decades ago, might have tasted thin and dull.

“In order to make it good, it needed bubbles,” Mr. Terrien said of the blueberry wine. “Just like Champagne, it needed the bubbles to make an otherwise lower alcohol, meager wine complete.”

In 2014, they made their first batch, 50 cases’ worth, in the same barn where Mr. Terrien had been married. It sold out quickly, entirely in the Portland area.

Working without a template, they made mistakes. At first, the bubbly wine had a tendency to erupt from the bottle when opened. Early on, Mr. Terrien

believed that the berries, with thin skins and barely discernible seeds, needed something to provide additional structure, so he included leaves in the fermentation. They added a distinct herbal flavor, which was not unpleasant but perhaps not optimal.

The learning curve has been quick, and each year, the wine has gotten better. They’ve moved out of the barn and into their own unit in an industrial park in Scarborough, Me.

Perhaps more important has been building relationships with blueberry growers, like Linda and Cary Nash in Appleton, who farm about 600 acres but last year did not harvest some plots because the price they were paid was too low.

Climate change has allowed Canada to grow far more wild blueberries than it used to, which has glutted the market, Mr. Nash said.

Mr. Terrien said the growers need to get 50 cents a pound to break even. Bluet is offering 70 cents a pound, three times what the processors were willing to pay in 2018.

This ray of hope has attracted the attention of the state of Maine, which, in its effort to preserve agricultural traditions, has given Bluet grants and loans.

The company plans to buy 40 tons of fruit in 2019, a significant increase from the 22 tons it bought last year, to make about 36,000 bottles. About 90 percent of that will be the simpler wine, to be sold primarily in Maine, with a little in New York, Massachusetts and California, and the rest will be the Champagne style, sold only in Maine. Consumers in many states can also buy directly from Bluet’s website.

Mr. Terrien knows this is just a trickle. For the farming business to turn around, and for wild-blueberry wine to prosper, he said, an entire industry would have to develop, both to build a wine economy and to gain a better understanding of the terroir of wild blueberries.

“It’s this iconic fruit of Maine, and we know there’s a cipher, a geography, that’s written into it,” he said. “It’s got to make something that speaks of this place.”

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