

Lone Vintner on 15 Acres on South Shore Defies the Skeptics

By CAROLE PAQUETTE

THE experts told him in 1983 that it could not be done, that grapes could not be grown on the South Shore because the climate and atmospheric conditions were not right. But Barney Loughlin went ahead and proved the skeptics wrong.

Ignoring those who told him that grapes could be grown only on the North Shore, where the combination of Long Island Sound and Atlantic Ocean is best, Mr. Loughlin bought 4,000 chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon vines and planted them on 5 of his 15 acres of farm on the Sayville-Bayport border.

He was successful. Ten years later East End viticulturists consider Mr. Loughlin, 68, a serious vintner. His vines number 6,000, and he is looking to expand with merlot, which he plans for two additional acres.

Mr. Loughlin said that he had no plans to enlarge further, that he had all he could handle and that he liked it that way.

Neat Rows of Budding Vines

"Right now, after the merlot, that's it," Mr. Loughlin said looking over his vineyard of 24 neat rows of pink budding vines held upright by bright blue and yellow plastic bands. "I'm having fun, and it's nice and peaceful out here."

Except for the harvest, Mr. Loughlin works the land alone, pruning in the winter and fertilizing and spraying in the summer. Come September, when the fruit is ready to be picked, help comes from family and friends, who turn out for three days of hard work. The harvest culminates in a huge chicken-and-ribs barbecue, after which the fruit is taken to the Peconic Bay Vineyards in Cutchogue.

"Barney is very serious about his vineyard, but the biggest key to his success is the tremendous number of loyal friends who help him when he begins his harvest. They come from everywhere," said Ray Blum, owner of the 57-acre Peconic Bay Vineyards.

Praise for Teacher

Mr. Loughlin credits Mr. Blum, whom he has known for eight years, with teaching him about the business. Mr. Blum was one of the few people who encouraged him to grow grapes for wine, Mr. Loughlin said.

Over the years, Mr. Blum has dispensed advice to Mr. Loughlin, including the idea to try merlot. "Merlot is a good grape for Long Island," Mr. Blum said, "It is easy to grow and it ripens earlier than the other reds. It is a soft wine that appeals to

the consumer better than the other full-bodied reds."

For the first six years Mr. Loughlin sold his fruit to commercial vineyards, including the former La Réve in Water Mill and Peconic Bay. "Ray suggested bottling our own," Mr. Loughlin said, "because by selling the fruit you never know what the price will be. Once it is made into wine you can sell it at your own price."

"One ton of grapes will bring in about \$1,000. A ton of fruit will bring in 800 to 900 bottles of wine. So in 1990 I decided to bottle it myself."

Of the 650 cases that Mr. Loughlin produces 400 are chardonnay, which, he said, is a best seller. "People seem to like white wine better," he said.

Owner of Printing Company

Viticulture is not Mr. Loughlin's sole line of work, especially because he spends \$10,000 a year on the vineyard and producing wine. He has not yet realized a profit, and he depends on his printing company in Sayville for a livelihood.

In the vineyard, where Mr. Loughlin spends at least one day a week, his biggest job is pruning in the winter, when the sap goes back to the roots.

"This I do in December," he said. "I leave 40 buds on each plant, figuring I get about 15 pounds of grapes from each plant."

In the spring Mr. Loughlin tends to the vines with the help of his 1948 8N Ford tractor, a 100-gallon sprayer and a rototiller. This year, he said, he is trying to prune his vines to go upright instead horizontally. That is to add fruit, because Mr. Loughlin plants vines three feet apart instead of six. "That's the way they do it in Europe," he said.

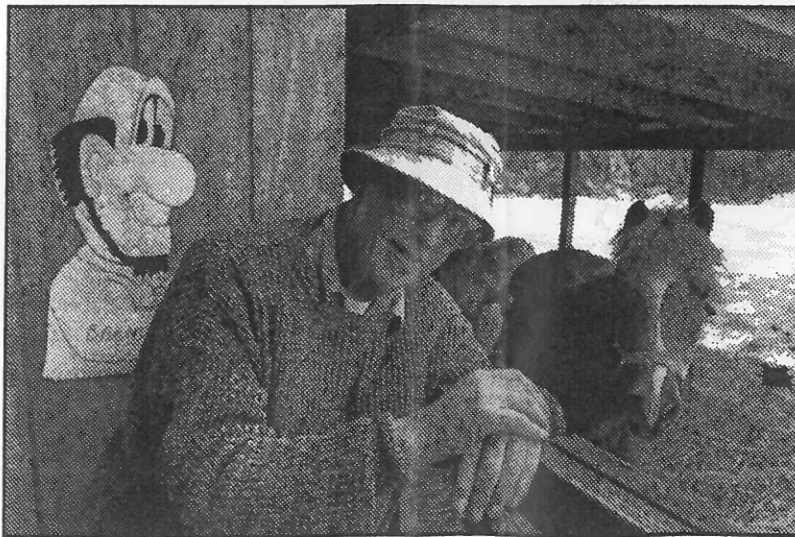
The cold winter weather did not hamper the plants, Mr. Loughlin said, adding, "Once spring came we found every plant alive and blooming."

After the grapes reach the proper sugar content, Mr. Loughlin explained, the harvest begins. The grapes are taken to Peconic Bay for crushing.

18 French Oak Barrels

After fermentation, the wine is aged in the 18 French oak barrels that Mr. Loughlin purchased for \$610 each. The chardonnay stays in the barrels for a year, the cabernet two years. The wine is then placed in Loughlin Vineyard bottles and labeled with a drawing of the family donkey, Pinky, who died at age 38 two years ago.

Selling the wine is up to Mr. Loughlin's family, including his wife, Christine, and daughters Mary Ellen Richter, Elizabeth Cutrone and Patricia Jones. They take orders and deliver cases to 12 liquor stores and 12 res-



Photographs by Michael Shavel for The New York Times

Barney Loughlin with some of the 6,000 vines on his farm in Sayville. He has chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon and is planning merlot. Left: Mr. Loughlin in his pony stable.

The owner of the Cull House on the Sayville waterfront, John Casey, said he sold 30 cases of Loughlin wines last year. "It's a good honest wine with no tricks to it," Mr. Casey said. "It is getting a good reputation. The '91 chardonnay was fabulous, a perfect example of what Long Island wine is like. The cabernet needs another year, though."

Mr. Loughlin's vineyard is on land he bought 40 years ago from Jean Roosevelt's 100-acre Meadowcroft estate, off Middle Road. Mr. Loughlin grew up on the estate, one of four children whose father was a caretaker.

From Cows to Grapes

The Roosevelt children, descendants of Theodore Roosevelt, and the Loughlin children played together. Mr. Loughlin said he purchased 15

acres property in 1950 and let cows and other animals roam the site until 1983. "I just decided to grow grapes when the last cow was gone," he said.

In 1992, Mr. Loughlin obtained his liquor and farm licenses, letting him sell his wine at the vineyard and commercially. On weekends that Meadowcroft is open to visitors, he puts out his sign that Loughlin Vineyards is open, too, for tasting.

Mr. Casey said he applauded Mr. Loughlin's efforts.

"I love his venture," Mr. Casey said. "Anybody who has the initiative to undertake a project and do it all the way. At his age, especially, it is enchanting. He did it on land he could have sold for a lot of money. He has given Long Island a sense of community."

GIVE TO THE FRESH AIR FUND