
FORK IN THE ROAD

BY VINCENT CLYNE

A HILLSIDE IN MILFORD

In ten short years, Tom Sharko has transformed an overgrown hillside into a nationally recognized, award-winning winery.

A visit to Alba Vineyard is well worth the trip.

The river ambles left while overhead, limbs arc leafy, lush and sun-dappled. Another short-on-time-long-on-work growing season is underway. Buds have broken, shoots and leaves have stretched skyward from vines, and fruit has followed flower. Nature is wondrous but human touch is required to ensure the continuation of this cycle. Plant, prune, pray, harvest, ferment, age. Centuries-old tradition married to technological innovation. Winemaking.

Less than fifty miles from home, amid the charming villages and scenic farmlands of Warren County, my wife and I are visiting Alba Vineyard, where award-winning wines are lovingly crafted from locally grown grapes in New Jersey. What, New Jersey? If this is the first thought that enters your mind right now, you're not alone. "Yes," you may say, "you could drink wine from New Jersey, but why would you?" Well, reasons abound. You could start with the "grow local, buy local, eat local" argument. Follow that up with the gold medals achieved in national, even international, competitions by Alba's Chambourcin (a medium-bodied red hybrid), Dry Riesling (crisp, citrusy, in the style of Alsace), Forbidden (a dessert wine made from Tewksbury apples), and Delaware



Photo of Tom Sharko by Vincent Clyne; other photos by Carole Topalian





Dolce (another dessert wine, this one made from indigenous Labrusca grapes). But ultimately, the only reason that matters is that they taste terrific, equally at home on the back porch or the dinner table.

Back in 1998, Tom Sharko and his wife went out for a drive and came home with a vineyard. They had fallen in love with the old stone buildings and sweeping views along the Delaware River, and though they had never planned on becoming vintners, ended up plunging headlong (with the help of their two sons) into the wine biz. “My friends thought I had lost my mind,” says Tom, a former financier and banker. “It was all so overgrown, and we had to rip out so much for the first few years, we were better at ripping out than actually growing vines. Now we have 93 acres with over 40 in vines, and more planned.” It’s a remarkable family achievement. In less than ten years, Tom, his wife and two sons have created a modern winery producing handcrafted, quality wines while retaining the character of a solid old barn in a handsome river valley in New Jersey.

Alba’s barn, home to the tasting room, retail outlet, gallery and office, invites one to step from the glare of the noonday sun into the barrel-lined cellar and inhale deeply of the coolness and oak and must. The room is impressive, with medals and ribbons adorning bottles lining every nook and cranny leading into the Musconetcong Art Gallery and reception area. In an adjacent room stands the pristine, Italian-made bottling line. “Tom really understands the business end, so I’m free to make wine,” says award-winning winemaker John Altmaier, running a hand over the empty bottles. “This baby—Tom bought it two years ago—saves us time and effort and worry and money,” he says appreciatively.

Back outside, behind the barn (it dates to 1805), a line of stainless steel tanks, rippled with cooling jackets, reaches to the eaves, kept company by a series of conveyors and de-stemmers and crushers. “Our equipment’s no-worries, all state of the art, so I concentrate on growing... it makes me smile whenever I walk by,” grins John, as we head out toward row upon row of vines. “When we have our SummerFest fireworks bash (*2008 Annual Fireworks Summerfest: Saturday, July 19; rain date July 26*), this area is packed with people,” he adds, indicating the open field in front of us. “And over there is Wedding Rocks,” squinting into the sun at a young couple arm in arm near a group of big boulders atop a rise, “where couples exchange vows, you have to love that.” I do.

Describing the growing season from bud break to harvest in terms of Mother Nature and amounts of rainfall, John is equally content. “We get enough where we don’t have to irrigate much, but not so much that it pounds the shoots into submission.” He picks some low hanging grapes, caressing them as we walk. Twenty-five years after first making wine in New Jersey, with previous experience in Europe and Australia, he self-deprecatingly laments that *now* he’s getting it right. We come into Riesling and he smiles knowingly, not letting us in on the thought. Next he leads us further up into Chambourcin. Alba’s ’05 release took gold in the California competition at Long Beach Grand Cru, a huge accomplishment for a New Jersey-grown and -produced wine. (The wine world is increasingly recognizing Alba’s penchant for quality production. Forbidden, their apple-based ice wine made with fruit from Melick Farm in Oldwick, recently won 2008 Best of Show, Best of Class in the prestigious San Diego Grand Cru.) A little higher up the hillside, beyond the wedding rocks, are Pinot Noir vines, sourced from upstate New York. “It’s the best soil and sun for pinot,” he says, studying the rows, and then adds, “Needs more TLC.” His devotion to the vine shines through. His charm is infectious.

Surprisingly, New Jersey has a long history of winemaking. In colonial days it was recognized as a producer of fine wines and this tradition is carried on today by the 38, mostly family-run wineries dotting the state, with more farmers turning to grapes each year. “Demand is up because quality is up,” Tom says. “We sold close to 14,000 cases last year and should grow to 20,000 this year, making us the second-largest producer in the state. We’re going for quality, for the very best product in the

bottle.” Tom and John have been regaling us with winery workings, wonders and worries, their dedication to quality first and foremost. Here they tag team us about minimal impact and sustainability and stewardship, varieties, viniculture and vintage, fermentation and filtering and fructose, racking and rim color, oak barrels and alcohol content. Whew. We sop it up.

Armed with John’s basic training in New Jersey Terroir 101 and a lesson in the burgeoning business from Tom, we turn back to the sanctuary of the tasting room to sample the fruits of their labor. We swirl. We sniff. We sip. We re-sample to narrow our selections. Anticipating our return, I daintily carry a mixed case out as my wife smiles, and momentarily, here, in the vineyard, in a river valley in New Jersey, all is right with the world. 🍷

Editor’s Note: Alba was recently named New Jersey’s 2008 Winery of the Year at the annual New Jersey Wine Competition in May.

ALBA VINEYARD & WINERY

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Village of Finesville,
near Milford
(908) 995-7800

Hours:
Sun - Fri: 11 am - 5 pm
Sat: 11 am - 6 pm

albavineyard.com

ROAD TRIP RECOMMENDATIONS

Wineries are a great destination for day travelers. Most offer daily tours and tastings as well as special events. Mark the dates below on your calendar and visit the Garden State Wine Growers’ website for more details and a full listing of wineries. newjerseywines.com.

Walk in the Vineyard Wine Trail Weekend July 12 and 13 (Noon to 5:00 p.m.) At participating wineries across the state

Jersey Fresh Wine & Food Festival August 9 and 10 (Noon to 5:00 p.m.) Hopewell Valley Vineyards, Pennington

Jazz It Up August 30 and 31 (Noon to 5:00 p.m.) Rain Date: September 1 Allaire State Park, Farmingdale

