



The Long Road to an Identity: Blair Vineyard Wines

My first encounter with what I judged to be a benchmark wine in Pennsylvania was on my first visit to Pennsylvania in 1998. The Crouch brothers at Allegro Vineyards in York County poured their Cadenza for me (along with A LOT of other remarkable wines), a red Bordeaux blend, and at that moment I realized that, well, fine wine was possible, perhaps inevitable, at least in the rolling hills of southern Pennsylvania. Recently, I was able to try a 1988 Cheval Blanc (94 RMP, \$350-500/btl – thanks Joanne!) with Carl Helrich, the successor to the brothers, and while we didn't have the Cadenzas on hand, he said the 1991 was strikingly similar to the Cheval Blanc in style, durability and quality. I am no wine expert, but I totally believe him. Suggestion: try Allegro's 2008 Cadenza, which carries forth the great tradition of quality established by John and Tim.

These benchmark encounters are important in the development of an emerging wine region. They define and validate what can be done and the exciting possibilities and potential of the local terroir. In the Old World of wine these are well-known and frequently acknowledged. Here, at least for the moment, the Finger Lakes and Long Island are our best examples. The theory is that if one person can do it, so can many others, if we can just find the right places and apply the best of our abilities.

I made an unannounced visit to Blair Vineyards in northern Berks County recently and, lucky for me, proprietor Rich Blair was present and so we marched down to the cellar to taste his 2010 Pinot noirs and Chardonnays. These, too, are benchmark wines of a different period than the Allegro. We barrel sampled his Pinot blend of Dijon clones 113, 115, 667 and Pommard; and a single clone Wedenswil (2A), and they knocked my socks off (note: Riedel stemware helped to elevate every nuance of the wines). I went through this exercise in Oregon, where we wanted to make something special and unique to the Willamette Valley, while using Burgundy as the benchmark but not trying to duplicate it. Rich, along with his wine maker Catherine Peyrot de Gachon, are on the path to greatness, the same as it was eventually achieved in Oregon.

I'm not a clever wine taster, nor very good with descriptors, suffice to say that the Pinot blend had the luscious fruit of a classic Volnay, Pommard, or Aloxe-Corton, which I always consider more silky and refined than the bigger wines from Vosne-Romanee or Chambertin. By no means do they lack density. They are full, rich, extremely well-balanced, with a firm backbone of acidity and soft tannins that are beautifully integrated into the wines. These generous wines prove the point that Pinot and the right slopes in the Lehigh Valley are made for each other. Rich was determined to prove the point and, well, it seems he has succeeded. The hard part is to repeat the feat, then achieve consistency.



Step outside into the vineyard and you see exactly how it is done: first and foremost, a great vineyard site. Shale soils that reach deep on rolling slopes with various exposures and local elevation features that encourage water and air drainage, and help to moderate vine vigor. It's a beautiful site, one that affirms the intent of the wine grower the moment you see it. Then look at the vineyard design: VSP on moderately high density vine spacing (4' between vines), on Riparia Gloire and 101-14 rootstocks. I cannot emphasize the importance of the interaction between soil and rootstock to determine vine size and balance, which is small to moderate. Look at the vines (with and without leaves) and they define the term balance, which is the holy grail of viticulture. Shoot length, diameter, and distribution are all in ideal proportion. Note that I am looking at 2011 vines, a radically different vintage from 2010. What we see now is the culmination of hundreds of individual decisions, most made before the vineyard was planted, in an attempt to achieve the wines we tasted.

As much as the best producers say that Pinot at its best is a hands-off variety, the wine making here deserves a lot of credit. The hardest decision in the vintage is when to pick the grapes and Rich and Cathy nailed it in 2010, even though I remember at the time that they lamented that they had waited too long. Pinot has a notoriously narrow window of ideal maturity – miss it early and the wine can be thin and saddled with one-dimensional fruit flavors, too late and flavors quickly wanders into the jammy and pruney realm. Here, the winemaking is evident in its absence. I always look for the oak, which is often used to cover blemishes, but here the oak is barely a feature of the wine. The amount and type of oak (all French cooperers) and length of time in barrel are all important decisions, made more difficult by a lack of wine making history at Blair. If Cathy and Rich used their palates to guide them through the maze of decisions, they did a great job. With experience, this process should become less challenging, never easy.

Next up were two 2010 Chardonnays, already bottled, which Rich felt was picked to late in a very warm vintage. Again, experience under variable conditions is probably the key to consistency in a cellar. The two Chardonnays are barrel fermented, *sur lie* wines that are, indeed,

very ripe and rich wines. The first wine was a bit more delicate and the oak was aggressive for my taste. The second wine, which was aged in barrel for an additional four months, had experienced a transformation that is almost unprecedented in my experience. The oak melded into the wine so there was a seamless integration that allowed the fruit to leap forward. The aromas and flavors of this wine are outstanding, but it is the texture that transported me to Puligny or Meursault. It was mind-bending in its richness, yet round and smooth as silk on the palate. Once again, everything was in fine balance, especially the acidity that is so important to give white wines their structure and verve, and not easily found in many 2010 white wines. I'm sort of in the ABC camp, I don't make a regular habit of Chardonnay, but this is one of the clear exceptions and proves, as many believe, that despite a world awash in Chardonnay, we should probably be making it here because we can grow outstanding Chardonnay. Much of the same wine growing and making that I describe for the Pinot applies to the Chardonnay, including a mix of Dijon clones.

As big or even bigger challenge than the wine making is the marketing of these wines. Blind taste them against the international benchmarks and I'm sure the results will affirm their quality against much more expensive wines. The question is can Eastern producers like Rich balance the books of production costs vs. return for the wines? Pinot noir is the most demanding of all because of its low yields, fussy viticulture, French oak, etc. This isn't in my area of expertise but I know if this problem can't be solved then we cannot have a sustainable fine wine industry in here. In my recent article about Long Island I observed that after 25 or so years their wines are finally on many wine lists in New York City. If consumers are willing to pay restaurant prices for local wines, then there is hope for the best quality wines and the mavericks like Rich who want to make them. I think Ontario is also pushing the price ceiling upwards. Hopefully we can achieve the same success, but I don't know how. I'm not sure if the "make and they will come" rule applies here.

We can do it here in 2010. We can make really nice wines: wines that compete at the international level of quality standards. The bugger is vintages like 2011. To be great, we have to figure out how to make very good wines in year like 2011. I'm not sure how to do this. It will take a lot of smart and dedicated people like Rich to meet this challenge. I have talked with a lot of wine growers, including Rich, about Pinot Noir in 2011 and, so far, the answer is not in sight. We need to sprint towards the light at the end of the tunnel. The answers will come from a variety of sources, including our best viticulture researchers and growers. As for me, I am open to all suggestions.

In the meantime, congratulations to Rich and Cathy on their wines. They made me smile the entire rest of the day and the memory of them lingers on my palate.

Mark L. Chien
Viticulture Educator
Penn State Cooperative Extension
<http://pawinegrape.com>
December, 2011