

The North Fork Evolution

From potatoes and farmhands to vines and foodies.

By Melissa Anne Martin

It's a brisk autumn morning. The sun's glow is lazily breaking over the colorful treetops. There is a peace resting over the mist that is now lifting from between the rows of vines. Today is Saturday on the North Fork of Long Island. The day will begin with a quiet energy and the momentum will grow as visitors venture east on the routes of "*Main Road*" and Sound Avenue, abundant in breathtaking farmland. After all, farms are the heart of the East End of Long Island. They are literally the soil in which business and tourism has sprouted. Only now, Long Island's agriculture boasts an even more valuable crop than its roots in potatoes and corn. The region has become a revealed destination for tourists and is proudly recognized worldwide as *Long Island Wine Country*. Among the vineyards and throughout our island's historic landscape, lies a story of family, culture, dedication and success- a story of evolution.

The traffic-ridden, October roads on the North Fork didn't always look that way. That's hard to believe, right? Since, this area is known for its fall crowds all coming for the wine tastings, the farm stands and maybe a fresh baked pie from Briermere's. I spoke with Matt Martin, North Fork resident since 1954. After summering out east for more than a decade, Mr. Martin explains to me that his family finally moved to New Suffolk from Staten Island when he was fourteen years old. I was curious what things were like then, as my family, and me personally, hadn't ventured out to the area until 1990. "Oh we had fun," Matthew described, "We cruised the bay in runabout boats. A lot of our time was spent at the beach playing and fishing. Many of us worked at fishing stations and charters, at the local markets and on family farms. That was *the thing* to do."

Matt tells me that the aspects that currently create a tourism destination were more recent. When he was growing up, families didn't come in droves to pick pumpkins or enjoy roasted corn in the midst of farm fields. These factors became more appealing and marketed as an "*experience*" as vineyards and tasting rooms began to make their debut. And what about all of the amazing restaurants and cozy eateries we have come to know and love on the East End? I asked Mr. Martin where he would have taken a date to dinner or where he would spend a Friday evening. "All of us would head down to the local soda shop. New Suffolk had one and the neighboring Southold had two!" He continues, "There were local eateries that we would frequent as a family such as Fisherman's or Claudio's, but nothing like you have today."

What do we have today? Today, a wine and food culture has organically melded together from the origins of this rich agricultural spot on the coast. Long Island began with a pioneer that decided to plant some grapes and begin the first winery in our region. From that inspired moment with a tremendous amount of dedication, Long Island Wine Country was born. The Hargrave family was the first to produce wine in

1975. Wine Country now has upwards of 60 vineyards and tasting rooms that have fueled the local economy.

I decided to approach long-time veteran of the wine industry, Jackie Rogers, to track the timeline more accurately and find out more about the winery business boom that is still very much booming. Ms. Rogers always followed the wine scene but became more involved when she and her husband, Bob joined the American Wine Society (AWS) in 1980. As program chairs of the AWS National Conference in 1995, Jackie and Bob introduced members to Long Island Wine Country, incorporating tasting sessions at wineries as part of the conference program. "There were only seventeen wineries at that time. I knew there was special potential here," Jackie explains, "Soon after, we became wine ambassadors and worked in the areas of education and wine training."

While still an active member of AWS, Jackie currently works for the Long Island Wine Council. The Wine Council was founded in 1989. The Council is an industry association dedicated to achieving recognition for Long Island as a premium wine-producing region. Its role is to provide a coordinated effort for the promotion and development of the region's wine industry. It has marked over 1.2 million visitors annually. "There is strength in numbers," adds Jackie, "The Council has the resources of all of the wineries instead of each individual winery working on its own. We are able to provide opportunities for grant funding and organized projects such as the New York City Marketing Initiative, that regularly wouldn't have been there without such an organization." The Long Island Wine Council provides a constant flow of visitors through Long Island-wide events.

So, what pairs best with a trip to Wine Country? An amazing meal is the perfect complement to the day, which has brought the biggest buzz and recognition to this ever-growing destination. Highly acclaimed restaurateurs have opened hot foodie spots serving gourmet cuisine that would proudly stand up to the best of New York City's dining community. (Zagat ratings and the celebrity guests tell us so.) Among these are The Frisky Oyster, The North Fork Table & Inn, Seafood Barge, Jamesport Manor Inn, Jedediah Hawkins Inn and Amano, to start. Their menus feature a vast range of beautifully prepared, delectable cuisine.

Entrepreneurs and creative minds of all ages are building their future on the ever-strengthening popularity of Long Island Wine Country and the North Fork. Did you know that there are more musical events hosted on the North Fork than ever before such as *Jazz on the Vine* and *Opera of the Hamptons*? The East End Arts Council presents an annual event that appeals to local and touring music-lovers called *The Wine Press Summer Concert Series*, where concerts under the stars are hosted at various wineries and become a picnic paradise for attendees. Additionally, many B&B's and country inns have opened their doors and have contributed to the overall North Fork getaway as well. Some other cultural expansions that have evolved can be found in the small village of Greenport. It dons over a dozen art galleries just spilling over with painted works,

photography and sculptures. No matter what your favorite vacation flavor, the North Fork has it all!

Time has definitely brought about an adaptation on the ever-popular North Fork. What does this mean for long-time residents such as Matt Martin? "I'm happy to see progress and prosperity!" He states, "It's good for residents and businesses alike." Progress and prosperity are surely evident.

So, what does the future hold for this culturally rich tourist destination? "The Long Island Wine Council is focused on expanding our markets. New wineries continue to open each year." Jackie Rogers added, "Long Island is now a nationally recognized wine region." This recognition could only mean further growth.

Visions for tomorrow's North Fork are in the works and we all look forward to experiencing the results. The vintages in wine, food and culture that we have tasted have been amazing and it can only get better. Cheers to the North Fork, Long Island's Wine Country Region, to their evolution into becoming a vital point on the savvy traveler's map!