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Sunday, August 23, 2009

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East vs. West

A California wino sets up camp in New York wine country



Courtesy of Nancy Irelan
Nancy Irelan and Mike Schnelle

By Hope S. Philbrick

If you think our nation's best wines are produced only in California, think again. When it came time to fulfill their dream of buying a vineyard, husband-and-wife team Nancy Irelan and Mike Schnelle chose property near Seneca Lake in the Finger Lakes region of western New York—despite the fact that Irelan was

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working in California's wine industry at the time as the vice president of viticulture and enology research and development for E & J Gallo Winery. They were lured by the Finger Lakes' breathtaking beauty and the fact that the region is home to hundreds of wineries that produce some remarkable wines.

When not toiling as winemaker for the couple's new Red Tail Ridge Winery, Irelan works as a vineyard-and-winery consultant, serves as an adjunct professor for the food science department at Cornell's New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, and is a member of the Cayuga County Highlands Search and Rescue Team.

What makes the Finger Lakes region suitable for growing wine grapes?



The climate, the soils and for us in particular our location next to the lake. We've got lakes all around us and are near the Great Lakes. Here on Seneca itself, the lake has a tremendous influence over the microclimate, such as providing some neutrality during extreme cold winter days. The soils in this region are pretty variable; for us, it's more river rock or pebble versus slate. You'll see some influences when you taste this wine: You'll taste fruit character and also minerality that you can attribute to the vineyard.

The thing about this region and the cool climate impact is that it makes the fruit very elegant, very expressive. It's not as voluptuous as warm-climate fruit, where you have a lot more phenolic and tannin influence, and also higher sugar levels that result in higher alcohol in the wines, which allow it to be more round. Wines like these are tighter and more elegant. I like wines to just shine when it comes to expression of fruit, and so I don't have a lot of oak in my wines.

What's going on in your vineyard this year?



Our winery is under construction and will be completed before this year's harvest. The 4,400-square-foot building will be green-certified at the silver level by the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED). It was important to us to be sustainable and take the best care we can of the environment and be good neighbors. All the heating and cooling will use geothermal energy, a large percentage of the building materials are recycled—newer materials were chosen if they're more energy efficient—we're making as little waste as possible, and have

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[April 2009 \(80\)](#)
[March 2009 \(105\)](#)
[February 2009 \(86\)](#)
[January 2009 \(73\)](#)
[December 2008 \(79\)](#)
[November 2008 \(100\)](#)
[October 2008 \(83\)](#)
[September 2008 \(87\)](#)
[August 2008 \(103\)](#)
[July 2008 \(96\)](#)
[June 2008 \(122\)](#)
[May 2008 \(100\)](#)
[April 2008 \(106\)](#)
[March 2008 \(131\)](#)
[February 2008 \(111\)](#)
[January 2008 \(103\)](#)
[December 2007 \(147\)](#)
[November 2007 \(133\)](#)
[October 2007 \(130\)](#)
[September 2007 \(108\)](#)
[August 2007 \(124\)](#)
[July 2007 \(102\)](#)
[June 2007 \(111\)](#)
[May 2007 \(121\)](#)
[April 2007 \(26\)](#)
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tried to source all the building materials within 500 miles. We were careful with site selection to avoid soil erosion and runoff. We'll recycle gray water from wine processing to use for irrigation.

It took us three years to clear the land and plant 20 acres of vineyard. We have 14 acres of Riesling, two acres of Chardonnay, three acres of pinot noir, a small plot of Teroldego and a few rows of Dornfelder.

How did you get into winemaking?



I was a chemist working for DuPont at their research facility. I knew I wanted to be a PhD. My background is really biochemistry, chemistry, biology, microbiology and physiology. I applied it to grape growing. **SP**

To learn more about Red Tail Ridge Winery, including how to order wines, visit • www.redtailridgewinery.com.

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