



## On the Vine

---

Louisa Thomas  
Hargrave

*Publication: The East Hampton Press & The Southampton Press*  
Aug 3, 09 4:59 PM

The 2009 vintage growing season on Long Island has been unusually cold and wet. For the East End's vintners, this year's relentless June rains and July's subsequent erratic and torrential thunderstorms have created the most challenging conditions possible (short of hail and hurricanes) for tender wine grapes.

While some vineyards are unscathed, in others, rain impaired bloom, slowed ripening, and allowed the spread of every kind of vineyard pest, from fungus to weeds.

Fortunately, although Long Island has a humid climate, its friable soils provide excellent drainage for wine grapes. Most of the East End's soils are similar variations of sandy loam, but their underlying soil structures differ from site to site depending on the combination and quantity of organic matter, microbial diversity in the root zone, and friability. In a field where heavy tractors drive over the same path for many years, the soil may be so compacted that it has a "hard pan" well below the surface, effectively blocking natural drainage.

For the past two decades, instead of cultivating their soils to control weeds, Long Island's vintners have used a permanent grass cover that is mowed instead of tilled down the vineyards' alleys, while weeds are controlled under the trellis with herbicides. Growers that don't want to use chemical weed control may have special tractor attachments to cultivate mechanically under the trellis, or even to burn weeds with a propane flame thrower. There is no perfect solution.

If this year's conditions are a greater challenge than usual for Long Island's vintners, they are equally challenging for vintners in other regions. On a visit to France's Champagne region in late June, I arrived as a day-long storm deluged their vines, just as many of them were in full bloom. For the next few days, the vintners expressed concern about crop loss, which was as site-specific there as it was here on Long Island.

Winemaking in Champagne is all about blending grapes from many sites throughout the region, usually combining several vintages to overcome the deficiencies of any single year. The Champenois all acknowledge the importance of the winemaker, yet every conversation about their wine begins with accolades to Champagne's terroir: that combination of heat-trapping slopes and chalk soil that makes viticulture possible at this latitude of 49°25', the farthest north of any grape-growing region. By contrast, the latitude of Napa, California, is 38°29'; Cutchogue is 41°01'; Bordeaux is 44°83'. Fargo, North Dakota, where it's much too cold for grapes, is 46°87'.

Chalk will absorb and reflect heat, and it can retain up to 40 percent moisture while at the same time draining excess water. As **Pascal Docquet**, a biodynamic grower-producer in

Champagne puts it, "Chalk comes from living forms, not from rock. We exist on the memory of the sea."

Mr. Docquet, whose wines express a true life force, believes in letting nature determine what grows beneath his trellis, including wild geranium, broom, and garlic. Disdaining the use of herbicides, mulch, or grass alleyways, he claims that these keep their roots at the surface, while competition from native plants drives the roots of his vines deep into the chalk.

Other Champenois with larger vineyards prefer to follow the guidelines set by their trade organization, the CIVC (Le Comité interprofessionnel du vin de Champagne), which recommends the same type of grass cover seen on Long Island.

Christophe Constant, at Champagne Vergnon, makes equally exciting wines from grapes grown with a grass cover crop. Mr. Constant likes the grass for erosion control. He told me that, although biodynamic practices may succeed on a small scale, they are "bête" (stupid) and impractical on a large scale because they make mildew control difficult.

Jean-Herve Chiquet of Champagne Jacquesson (whose founding family in 1844 developed the revolutionary practice of planting vines in rows and, with Guyot, training them in the system now used here on LI), agrees with Mr. Constant. Having seen poor results in some vineyards with biodynamic practices, he said, "If you make zero anti-mildew treatments in Champagne, you have zero wine. We have an easy principle: good fruits give good wine."

Associate director and winemaker Jean-Baptiste Lecaillon of Champagne Louis Roederer, a maker of wines with an international reputation second to none, offered me a balanced view of alternative and conventional practices. Of Roederer's 214 hectares of vines, scattered throughout the region, nine are biodynamic.

"You have to be careful in this church of biodynamics," he said. "Be humble; try to understand nature, not to control it. Remember that the natural destination of wine is vinegar."

Most of Roederer's vineyards have a grass cover, but the company is experimenting with wider spacing to minimize soil compaction from tractors, and they deep plow yearly to cut surface roots, driving them into the chalk. They believe that site selection is most important, having traded plots to concentrate the company's holdings to the center slopes during the past 30 years.

Another prestigious, family-owned house, Billecart-Salmon, found its best vineyard site, the Clos St. Hilaire, not on a chalky slope, but on a single hectare plot of alluvial soil that was, until 1967, a garden and tennis court surrounded by the family's private home and winery. Planted entirely in pinot noir, with a grass cover and cultivated using "partly" organic practices, these old vines yield an extraordinarily textured, brilliant wine.

This makes me wonder; is it really about the soil, the cover crop, the terroir ... or something more evanescent: all that, plus the devotion of the viticulteur, that makes a great wine.

As the saying goes, "In vino veritas": the truth is in the wine.