Hammering Out a Vision

Forge Cellars brings together Old World and New World winemaking

story and photos by Jason Feulner

The word “forge” evokes images of a process—nearly sacred in many societies—of merging separate parts of ore into something both valuable and useful. Prior to the industrial revolution, a blacksmith was charged with creating the tools, hardware, and weapons that society needed to flourish.

Forging metal is a hot, laborious pursuit requiring great skill and experience. It demands constant diligence, and is often fraught with compounding difficulties. A craftsman with a forge can create great art, but it takes a lot of work. And so goes winemaking as well.

It was with this analogy in mind that Rick Rainey, while driving up from a wine sales trip to Florida several years ago, saw forge on a road sign and reflected on his emerging, and unlikely, winemaking alliance. Rainey, a Philadelphia native who moved to the Finger Lakes 17 years ago, had worked in a few Finger Lakes wineries in a variety of capacities before becoming a manager for Winebow, one of the world’s premier importers and distributors of wines. Over time, his international portfolio of clients brought him into contact with many of the world’s best brands and their winemakers, and that is how he came in touch with Louis Barruol.

The team

Who is Louis Barruol? Among wine enthusiasts and critics, his name is synonymous with quality wine in the important Rhone Region of France. The wines made at his estate, Château de Saint Cosme, earn some of the highest marks from the top critics, and are praised by wine lovers the world over. Barruol’s family has been making
wine for 14 generations, having owned the vineyard property since 1570. Like many European winemakers, his craft is one steeped in tradition.

Rick Rainey still describes Barruol's deep interest in the Finger Lakes with the excitement that undoubtedly accompanied his initial discovery of the European master's genuine curiosity. Engaged in conversation one day in 2008 during one of Rainey's trips to France, Barruol asked Rainey to further describe the Finger Lakes and its winemaking potential. Intrigued, Barruol asked more and more questions, eventually prompting several trips to the Finger Lakes where Rainey took

Hector Wine Company
Forge Cellars' wine can be tasted at Hector Wine Company on the eastern shore of Seneca Lake. While you're there, make sure to try winemaker Justin Boyette's wines made under the Hector Wine Company label. He and his partner and grower Jason Hazlitt have pursued several varietals that are not made in abundance in the Finger Lakes. It's an excellent lineup.

Barruol on a tour of some of the best wineries and vineyard sites. Overall, Barruol was just as impressed as he was critical of the emerging region. As it became clear that Barruol was open to collaboration, Rainey brought in a third partner, Justin Boyette, co-owner and winemaker at Hector Wine Company. Rainey had known Boyette for years as he honed his winemaking skills in well-known Finger Lakes wineries like Atwater and Red Newt. Boyette founded the Hector Wine Company in 2010 and pursued a style that appealed to both Rainey and Barruol. It seemed a good match for their new project. The Forge Cellars partnership, merging the Old World and the New, was born.

The team itself is a bit of an

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uncanny amalgamation by the standards of most wineries. Boyette is the official winemaker, but he is driven and informed by the vision of Louis Barruol. Rick Rainey is a co-founder and overall manager of the brand, but he is just as likely to get involved with harvest and production as he is in marketing and distribution. Barruol makes a point of coming to the Finger Lakes a few times a year to taste, blend and consult; and to push the limits of quality. “He’s very involved,” Rainey assures me. “We are on Skype talking to Louis all the time.”

**A unique approach to Riesling and Pinot Noir.**

Riesling seemed a natural direction to go in considering the success of the grape in the Finger Lakes, but team Forge decided to alter the normal process a bit and ferment and age over half of the lots in neutral oak instead of exclusively stainless steel (French oak, that is, in hand-picked barrels sent over by Barruol himself). Their approach to Riesling is reminiscent of the Alsatian style, driven by minerality and acid, framed by steely fruit, with a nice soft feel provided by the oak.

The Pinot Noir at Forge is earthy and restrained with layers upon layers of nuanced fruit. “To make a nice Pinot you really have to pay attention to detail,” Boyette explains. “At times, the less you do the better.” Boyette also points to the “native” or indigenous yeast the team uses for fermentation. Instead of adding laboratory cultured yeast to the grape must, Boyette allows fermentation to start on its own from yeasts already found in the environment. In addition, Barruol insisted from the start that the red wines be fermented in large oak tanks instead of bins, a method popular in Europe but used rarely in the United States.

With only two vintages under its
Outside Looking In

The Louis Barruol project at Forge Cellars is only one of the latest examples of outside interest in the Finger Lakes wine industry. At the end of 2013, news broke that wine entrepreneur Paul Hobbs had begun to clear terraced vineyard land north of Watkins Glen on the east side of Seneca Lake. Called the "Steve Jobs of wine" by Forbes, Hobbs has built a small global empire in California, Argentina and in other parts of the globe. Often credited with getting ahead of future trends in wine, Hobbs has announced that he is building a Riesling operation in the Finger Lakes which will be run in partnership with a German winemaking team.

While it will take several years for this project to come to fruition, observers are keenly interested in what Hobbs is planning and how this new investment will affect the perception of Finger Lakes wine the world over.

Cellars (a little over 2,200 cases annually) are sold mostly in wine shops and restaurants across New York and several other states in all parts of the country. Rainey says the group has plans to open a Forge Cellars tasting room at some point in the next few years, but one that is appointment-only.

Rainey says he is inspired by Barruol's enthusiasm for project Forge. "In a place like the Finger Lakes, he has freedom," he says, referring to the strictures that set rules on grape sourcing and winemaking in France's heavily regulated wine regions. "Barruol cares about beauty. He is energized by the challenge of making good wine here, even when it's difficult." Reflecting on his own experience thus far, Rainey believes that the effort has been well worth it: "Forge is about the love of wine, but really this is all about the desire to do something great and everlasting. It's just so interesting."

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