Tackling Pinot Noir in the Finger Lakes

At Forge Cellars, partners from the Rhône Valley and New York meet the challenge

by Ray Pompilio

Pinot Noir is a difficult cultivar to grow successfully. Named “the heartbreak grape” by Marq De Villiers in his 1994 book about winemaker Josh Jensen at the Calera Wine Co., it continues to challenge growers and winemakers throughout numerous grapegrowing regions, especially in New York’s cool-climate Finger Lakes.

This challenge is being met head-on by a partnership stretching from Gigondas, France, to Hector, N.Y., with its center at Forge Cellars on the east shore of Seneca Lake. The three partners include Louis Barruol, winegrower and winemaker for Chateau de Saint Cosme, owned by his family since 1570 (Barruol is the 42nd family member to serve as winemaker), and two wine professionals in the Finger Lakes: winemaker Justin Boyette and general manager/vineyard manager, Rick Rainey. Forge Cellars’ 2011 vintage, its first, was produced at the Hector Wine Co., where Boyette is winemaker.

Each vintage through 2016 was produced there, but Forge now has a brand-new standalone facility built nearby. The winery produces wines only from Riesling and Pinot Noir. The 2015 and 2016 vintages are currently aging at the new winery, and 2017 will be the first vintage produced there.

The new, energy-efficient winery facility is a 6,500-square-foot building designed and built under the direction of Rick Rainey. It was constructed of structural insulated panels (SIP) built by Energy Panel Structures Inc. (EPS Buildings) based in Graettinger, Iowa, and assembled onsite by JLS Construction of Clyde N.Y. It has R35 insulation in the walls, R45 insulation in the ceilings and was placed on an insulated foundation done by Superior Walls of Upstate New York, in Lima, N.Y.

All plumbing and electrical components are surface mounted for ease in possible expansion and replacement. It has high-efficiency heat pumps and air conditioning units installed by Wixson Heating and Cooling of Alpine, N.Y., and all the piping for the chillers is insulated by Cool-Fit ABS, made by Georg Fischer North America LLC of Irvine, Calif. The winery uses propane for its forklift and hot water. The high-efficiency theme includes LED lighting from Big Ass Fans & Lights based in Lexington, Ky., and all final trim work and concrete pouring was done by Schickel Construction, of Ithaca, N.Y.
The genesis of Forge Cellars dates back almost 20 years, to when Rick Rainey began his Finger Lakes wine experiences at nearby Chateau LaFayette Reneau. Before long, his wine career changed from production to distribution, and he worked several years with Winebow, a prominent importer and wholesaler of fine wines. Rainey’s job required traveling to France, which led him to meet Louis Barruol. Unknown to Rainey, Barruol had been contemplating working with cool-climate grapes not common to the Rhône Valley. One day, over lunch in Gigondas, Rainey was describing the characteristics of the Finger Lakes, and Barruol became interested in learning more. About two months later, Barruol came to the United States to take a close look at the region.

“The next thing you know, he was here,” Rainey recalls. “He told me he had always wanted to do a project outside of France but never found a place that was right.”

At that time, Justin Boyette was working at a Seneca Lake winery, Atwater Estate Vineyards, and part-time at a nearby fine wine shop owned by Rainey’s wife. When Barruol visited, Rainey asked Boyette to set up appointments at Finger Lakes wineries and vineyards. The three began visiting locations together in fall 2007, spending the next year and a half searching for sites, tasting wines, taking soil samples and finally deciding to make a commitment. In 2008 Boyette also teamed with Jason Hazlitt to design and open the Hector Wine Co., where Boyette remains winemaker. Hazlitt had deep roots in the area: He is the grandson of Jim Hazlitt, who pioneered the expansion of *vinifera* viticulture along Seneca Lake.

Hector Wine Co. produced its first vintage in 2009, and Forge Cellars followed with its own first vintage in 2011. Forge Cellars purchased grapes from eight vineyards in the Finger Lakes, all but one on the east side of Seneca Lake, with the other on the west shore of Keuka Lake. Forge also hopes to encourage contract growers to expand their Pinot plantings and wants to be a prominent producer of that wine in the region. Although they will continue to purchase grapes, Forge Cellars wants to establish its own identity with an estate vineyard.
In 2016 the winery planted 3 acres—2 acres of Pinot Noir and 1 acre of Riesling—and it’s adding another 3 acres this year. Rainey, Barruol and Boyette plan ultimately to grow 10 acres of Pinot Noir and 5 acres of Riesling. The planting is done by Benchmark Vineyard Custom Planting, run by Tim Hosmer in Ovid, N.Y., a few miles east of Hector, and the vines are sourced from the Hermann J. Wiemer Nursery on the west side of Seneca Lake. The Pinot Noir clones currently include Pommard and Wadenswil (both popular in Oregon) and 677, 777 and 115, all on 3309 rootstock.

Much of the direction of Forge Cellars follows an Old World approach supplied by Gigondas-based Louis Barruol. From vineyard planting and management to the winemaking style and equipment, Barruol’s influence is very evident. Rainey plans to source a Massal selection propagated from other vineyards and hopes to include a selection from Leidenfrost Vineyards down the road. Barruol is the inspiration for the Massal technique, a practice he employs in his Gigondas vineyards. Once the cuttings are selected, they will grow in the vineyard for a couple years, developing the root system before training the vines for fruit production.

The Forge vineyard is a high-density planting, with vines spaced 3 feet by 7 feet. The intent is to optimize the energy input used for maintenance, enabling them to handle twice the amount of vines per tractor pass such as during spraying and cultivation. The vineyard soil is a mix of friable gray shale bedrock, free limestone, clay and shale. Rainey noted that the heavier component of clay was a key to the vineyard. He says, “I like Pinot Noir in clay, and with this shale-limestone combination it will fit Pinot well.” The vines are trellised with

“We take pictures of the grapes, tell (Louis Barruol) how they taste and describe the conditions at each vineyard.”

—Justin Boyette, Forge Cellars winemaker
Guyot-like flat cane VSP, with the fruiting zone at about 22 inches high. Vine maintenance and spraying is currently done by contract work with Phil Davis, co-owner and vineyard manager of nearby Damiani Cellars.

Rainey, when referring to their emphasis on Pinot Noir, says, “It's a bit of a gamble; the vineyard is right on the edge of the upper limit,” with an altitude of 900 feet above sea level. He noted, however, that in Burgundy Pinot Noir is planted in the cooler northern regions and he feels the Hector area will easily allow full ripening—usually by the third week of September. He aims to develop the vineyard in an organic and Biodynamic direction, which he feels will provide better fruit. As a first step, he has chosen to use cedar posts in the vineyard rather than typical pressure-treated posts. Obviously, the vineyard is a work in progress, and Rainey tells Wines & Vines, “We haven’t begun to scratch the surface here yet.”

Forge currently produces about 1,000 cases of Pinot in two styles: Classique and Les Allies. The core of Les Allies comes from grapes purchased from nearby grower John Leidenfrost, who is also proprietor of his family winery, Leidenfrost Vineyards, with 30 acres of vineyards and annual production of about 3,000 cases of wine. He planted his first Pinot Noir in 1986 with vines from Hermann J. Wiemer’s nursery, including clones purported to be from the Burgundian vineyard at Clos du Vougeot winery.

Initially, Leidenfrost encountered problems that included over-cropping, bunch rot, leafroll and crown gall. In order to combat the vigor problems, he converted his trellis system from vertical shoot positioning (VSP) to Scott Henry, but after some years of this he returned to using VSP. Over the years, Leidenfrost has replaced about 30% of the original vines, citing mortality problems associated with some of the cold winters experienced in the Finger Lakes. “I’ve replanted with a mixed bag of different clones,” he says, specifically clones 113, 115, 667 and 777.
About two years ago, Leidenfrost took cuttings from the strongest vines in the block and gave them to the current proprietor at Hermann J. Wiemer nursery and winery, Fred Merwarth, who virus-tested the 98 samples for leafroll. Only 10% of the cuttings tested positive for leafroll, and Leidenfrost is now ready to plant another 4 acres of Pinot from cuttings without leafroll. He also has planted 2 acres of clones 115 and 667, the latter of which he really likes. Counting the “cloned” planting, he will have a total of 12-13 acres of Pinot Noir, the largest Finger Lakes planting of this cultivar.

According to Leidenfrost, the key to growing good Pinot Noir is managing the trellis. “It’s a real big issue. You have to get the leaves out of the fruit zone and open it to spray, air and sunshine,” he says.

As the vines age and lose some of their vigor, he concentrates on keeping the canes economically pruned, with special attention to shoot positioning and modest leaf removal, all while using VSP. Beyond Pinot Noir’s winter sensitivity, he believes the best grapes need to fully ripen without over-ripening. At harvest, the grapes are sorted in the vineyard after being hand-picked according to specific ripeness within the blocks, rather than at an average of the sum of the parts. This particularly suits the needs of Forge Cellars, which in turn will perform its own hand sorting after the purchased grapes arrive.

The ripeness determination for grapes used at Forge is made with a combination of old and new methods. Rainey and Boyette take berry samples as ripeness evolves and send the sample information to France for Barruol, who only comes to the winery three or four times per year.

“We take pictures of the grapes, tell him how they taste and describe the conditions at each vineyard,” Boyette explains. This is all done via email and Skype, almost eliminating their geographical separation. Barruol tries to visit at least once during harvest, but the timing can be complicated by the Finger Lakes and Gigondas harvest conditions.
Once the grapes are delivered, the bins are emptied onto a sorting table via a bin dumper, and four to six people seek to eliminate the sub-par fruit. DeJong Products Inc. (DPI) in Sheridan, Ore., is the supplier for both pieces of equipment. Selected grapes are crushed and destemmed in a small crushe/destemmer on loan from the Hector Wine Co. Forge includes some whole-cluster grapes in the fermentation, basing their inclusion on the ripeness of the stems as well as the grapes. The process takes place in large (5-8 ton) used oak vats produced by Tonnellerie Taransaud in Cognac, France.

The fermentation utilizes indigenous yeast and completes in two to three weeks at below 30°C (86°F). Boyette noted that fermentation begins very quickly unless air temperatures are particularly cool. Regardless of the timing, no fermentation aids or enzymes are used. He employs daily pumpovers and averages several punchdowns per fermentation. For their six vintages, the Pinot Noir averaged between 21.5° and 23° Brix. In 2016, TA ranged between 5.5 and 6.5 g/L, slightly lower than in previous years.

Upon completion of the fermentation, the free run is immediately transferred into French Burgundy cooperage at a ratio of about one-third new barrels to two-thirds used. Forge uses several coopers, with the largest concentration coming from Tonnellerie Taransaud. The used barrels come directly from Barruol’s estate, Chateau de Saint Cosme. Boyette has become more aggressive in removing the oldest barrels from the mix, citing loss of tannin structure and barrel loosening/leakage problems as the main factor.

The remainder of the must is shoveled out of the vats to be pressed. Forge has two Bucher Vaslin presses, Model 22 and Model 32, imported from France. The press run is “long and slow,” according to Boyette. The new wine is settled for a couple days and checked to ascertain complete fermentation. It is then transferred to barrels, with the free run and pressed wines kept separate.
No SO₂ is added to the newly coopered wines in order to allow for a fairly quick indigenous malolactic (ML) fermentation. Time required for ML has varied considerably at Forge, having finished as early as late November to as late as springtime. During ML, samples are taken for analysis and sent to the Finger Lakes Wine Laboratory at Dairy One in Ithaca, N.Y. A minimal amount of potassium metabisulfite is added to the ML-completed wine, depending upon its wine chemistry. The wines continue to barrel age separately until August, when they are blended and tanked prior to bottling. Blending is done by all three owners and includes Boyette’s assistant winemaker. Barruol flies from France annually for the blending sessions. Their Pinot Noir is unfined and unfiltered.

The newly blended wines are stored in different sized tanks, which include variable-capacity tanks depending on the bottling batch size. The tanks range up to 1,500 gallons and are sourced from Vance Metal Fabricators of Geneva, N.Y., and Prospero Equipment Corp. in Pleasantville, N.Y., serving the Finger Lakes area from another site in Geneva, N.Y. Forge recently acquired a number of larger used tanks sent from France by co-owner Barruol. Bottling is done by a mobile bottling line operated by Phil Aris, who is also the winemaker for Damiani Cellars in Burdett, N.Y.

As previously mentioned, Forge produces two different Pinot Noirs, Classique and Les Allies. Boyette describes Classique as a lighter style, with two to three months’ bottle age, while Les Allies is more intense and concentrated. It is bottle aged for six to eight months. Much like the wines’ processing and aging, the amount of bottle aging is dependent upon the character of the specific vintage.

Most recently Forge Cellars produced 1,000 cases of Pinot Noir and 3,500 cases of Riesling. The Classique Pinot Noir retails for $26 per bottle, and the Les Allies Pinot Noir sells for $32. Conversely, the Classique Riesling is priced at $21, and the Les Allies Riesling is $26 per bottle. Forge also produced three single-vineyard Rieslings in 2014, all selling for $24 per bottle. Thanks to a worldwide distribution network built by Louis Barruol, Forge Cellars wines are distributed in 36 states and almost 30 countries (the Pinot Noir entered the European market for the first time in the fall of 2016).
Old World tradition dating back almost 450 years in Gigondas has met up with New World viticulture in the Finger Lakes, where *Vitis vinifera* grapes have been grown for less than 60 years. It’s a new partnership and matches centuries-old European wine production and modern American building technology. Forge Cellars has a promising future if early efforts continue to develop as they have so far.

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