

Wine & Dine *Rob Lane*

The Portman Cometh

Mark Karasz, owner of Rock Stream Vineyards on the west side of Seneca Lake, has taken a long and winding journey to get to the Finger Lakes, a place he calls “God’s gift to the Universe.” Born and raised on Long Island, he was accepted at West Point at the age of seventeen and proceeded to see the world. Twenty years and four months later, he retired from the military and contemplated his next move.

As a West Point graduate and a Ph.D. in chemistry, he dabbled in teaching, but he only lasted two days at a high school before the students “drove him crazy.” He also considered working with “carbon nanotubes” for a large corporation, a field in which he worked on classified projects for the military. As Mark says, “I’d tell you about those projects, but then I’d have to terminate you,” and you know by the tone of his voice that he means it.

But in the end, the years he spent making wine and grappa and hanging around with some of Europe’s top wine and grappa makers in Germany and Italy stayed on his mind and made the decision easy. Mark acquired a forty-acre farm in Rock Stream, New York, in 2001, and opened his tasting room in 2005. He crafts a variety of wines, including Riesling, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Vignoles, Dechaunac, and Niagara, but he is quickly becoming known for his unique port-style wines.

Traditional port wine is a dessert wine that is fortified with brandy and, from the official European Union laws defining port, it must be produced in the region of Douro, Portugal. The high alcohol in the brandy (80 proof and above) stops the fermentation of the wine at a higher sweetness level without risk of re-fermentation, producing an alcohol level from 18 to 22 percent. Traditional port is then aged in wooden barrels and in the bottle for up to several decades.



Karasz readily admits that his first love is distilling grappa, an Italian brandy made from distilling grape skins that remain after wine production. Rock Stream is one of only a few licensed Grappa and Grape Brandy distilleries in the Finger Lakes and, with the copper still that Mark purchased in Portugal, he produces the brandy that he uses for his port-style wines. Mark currently produces a Vignoles Port, Castel Port, and a Merlot Port, and has more in the works including a Traminette Port.

The Vignoles Port is perfectly sweet without being overbearing, with candied citrus overtones, and is impeccably

balanced with the citrus and tropical fruit highlights from the Vignoles grape shining through. Karasz uses his own Pinot Noir brandy to produce an alcohol content of 18 percent, but the alcohol is subdued resulting in a very smooth wine.

The Merlot Port is similarly very balanced with deep plum overtones from the Merlot fruit and a smooth candied cherry finish, with the alcohol once again being very subdued. The Castel Port from Castel grape has a beautiful deep purple color and produces complex and layered flavors of candied plum, raspberry, and strawberry, producing a wonderful aperitif or dessert wine.

Mark’s winemaking philosophy is “keep it simple and let the grapes do what they want to do.” He strives for a “fun and friendly” atmosphere in his tasting room. Karasz is also a musician, and you can hear him and a variety of musicians putting on impromptu concerts for visitors at the tasting room. Mark is even working on a CD of songs about Rock Stream wine.

Listening to Mark Karasz, the great pride he takes in handcrafting small batches of wine, grappa, and port is evident. Mark states, “I want this winery to be an expression of my life, my personality, and my family, who have given me great support. I value quality over quantity.”

Finger Lakes Wine Review *Holly Howell*

Standing Stone Gewürztraminer 2007

Thanksgiving is here! Time to stock up on some good turkey wines for the big day. When you look at all of the different flavors on the holiday table, one might say that anything goes as far as wine. I have several all-time favorites, including Champagne (why not?), Riesling and Rosé. However, this year I have chosen a bottle that will knock my guests socks off. It is one of the stellar wines of the Finger Lakes region. The grape is called gewürztraminer, and it originally hails from Germany. Although it is a mouthful to pronounce (Guh-VURTS-trah-MEE-ner), it is an even a better mouthful to swallow. “Gewürz” translates to spicy, and this wine is all that. Spicy in the savory sense—ginger, nutmeg, and clove flavors all combine with beautiful floral notes (think honeysuckle and lavender) to make a dry, rich, mouth-filling wine. Standing Stone produces one of New York state’s finest versions, and the 2007 vintage (\$17) is a yummy classic. This wine is completely versatile at the table and rocks with spicy foods like Mexican, Indian, and Thai. It is also a lovely wine with artisan cheeses. But it is a shoe-in for the traditional turkey spread and is always a staple on my holiday table.



WHAT: Rock Stream Vineyards
WHEN: Open every day 10 a.m.–6 p.m.
WHERE: 162 Fir Tree Point Road, Rock Stream, NY 14878
INFORMATION: 607-243-5395; www.rockstreamvineyards.com

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