

Plant a Vine and Make Some Wine

Relatively speaking, wine making is a simple process. If you crush grapes and leave them in a cool, dry place, the juice will ferment into wine because of the naturally occurring yeast on the skins of the fruit. Using modern techniques and equipment, vineyards can produce wine like never before; however, home wine making hasn't changed much and is usually found in families that have passed down the practice for generations from their ancestors in Europe.

Henry Silveira, like so many other Portuguese immigrants to the United States, ended up living around the Narragansett and Mount Hope Bay. Henry immigrated to the US in 1975 and over time made a home with his wife, Bella, overlooking Mt. Hope Bay. Henry buys red grapes from California, grows his own Isabella grapes and also buys what he can locally. This year, along with his red, he's making a white wine with vidal blanc grapes from Greenvale Vineyards in Portsmouth.

"One day I go help her pick up the grapes, for nothing. I didn't charge her anything, I didn't want anything," Henry explained. "And she was so nice to me! Before they pick the white grapes, the Skipping Stone, she let me pick 10 big crates of white grapes!"

The white wine is tart and filled with the acid of fresh-picked citrus fruit. The finish is crisp and lingers for a bit.

In a phone interview with Nancy Parker Wilson, the owner of Greenvale Vineyards, she described how her grape pickers would maybe be a third of the way down their row of grapes while Henry would be finishing his.

"You could tell he really enjoyed it. He was just there for the fun of it," Nancy said.

Rhode Island has always been a haven for farming; it has rich topsoil and it drains moderately well. Maggie Harnet, Greenvale Vineyards tasting room and event manager, explained how the the soil composition, topography and climate are perfect for growing grapes. The Gulf Stream's warm wind patterns and waters create a temperate climate for the southeastern facing slopes, which soak up as much light as they can.

"We have really nice growing conditions," Nancy said, describing Aquidneck Island. "Locally it's been referred to as the Eden of America among farmers."

The Bay keeps the surrounding land warmer for more of the year and allows the grapes to ripen for longer and support heartier breeds of grape.

Especially in southern Rhode Island, despite not being as warm as the Bordeaux, Nancy says, "The malbec, merlot and cab franc growing in Rhode Island can create just as long of a finish as any eight-year-old Bordeaux coming out of France."

Henry's red from this year is a deep maroon with a tawny edge to the color. It's a blend of zinfandel and the Isabella grapes he grew. The nose and taste is big and juicy like you'd expect in a young bottle of red wine.

“This is only four, five months old, but it’s already drinkable,” Henry said.

For some vintners, like Henry, making wine is a part of life. But if you didn’t grow up with a parent teaching you how to tend the garden grapes, making your first batch of wine can be intimidating. Luckily the growing access to local vineyards and knowledge is making the process easier.

Each year by the middle of October the grapes are ready to harvest. If you ask around you can find a vineyards like Greenvale that need help picking their grapes quickly, and often you can exchange your time for wine from the vineyard. So ask around, get your hands dirty and pick up some wine making tips in the process.