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The Mayor of the Vineyard

John Ingle lives connected to the earth, but he's out to change the wine world.

by Suzette Norris

A few years back, Naples grape grower John Ingle came across a seedless variety of the Concord grape. It made him think of grape pie. And that made him contact Monica Schenk, owner of Monica's Pies near Naples.

"I told John, 'Sure, let's try it,'" she recalls. Every year, Schenk has to run eight to 10 tons of Concord grapes through a colander or food mill to remove the seeds. But when Ingle's first seedless crop comes up at the end of the summer, he'll sell some to Schenk to see how it goes.

Ingle isn't necessarily out to revolutionize the grape pie business. But his unwavering focus on growing grapes leads him to new ideas. He approaches his craft much like a composer works the notes on a scale, studying, coaxing, nurturing and then dreaming about where the fruit can take him.

Ingle, founder of Heron Hill Winery, is considered one of the region's foremost experts in growing grapes. Through his quiet communion with nature and a steadfast lifestyle of hands-on farming, Ingle has become a convincing missionary for western New York agriculture and its wine.

For almost 40 years, Ingle has put stock in the notion that the atypical growing climate of the Finger Lakes could support a style of wine that would draw wine drinkers. That notion, he says, has been "stuck in neutral" for a number of reasons, including a prolonged and powerful public relations effort around California's full-bodied, oak-heavy Chardonnay.

The California heat creates higher sugar levels and, as a result, higher alcohol content in wine; oaking tones it down. "Since the early 1970s the California (public relations) people have convinced everyone that oak is what Chardonnay is all about," he says. "But now people are starting to break out of that grasp."

Lighter-style wines that are fruitier and lower in alcohol, he argues, compliment food better because they don't overpower. As that realization takes hold, it brings huge potential not only for Finger Lakes Riesling but for unoaked or lightly oaked Chardonnay

wines from our region. He believes the next generation will be more open to different styles (Finger Lakes vs. California), and he's doing what he can to spread the word.

Most recently, Ingle hatched the idea of a new festival. After attending the American Folk Festival in Bangor, Maine, a few years ago, "he called me and said, 'Let's do the same thing here,'" says Howie Jacobson, a managing partner of Dixon Schwabl marketing firm. After sharing the idea with a few people in town, the Finger Lakes Riesling Festival took shape, debuting Aug. 15 and 16 along the north shore of Canandaigua Lake to tout Riesling as one of our signature, world-class offerings.

"Mother Nature has been pointing us towards a style of wine that people are going to be looking for in the near future, and I'm excited this time has finally arrived," Ingle says. "The Finger Lakes will always be a boutique type of place, but that's part of the charisma of New York."

His own boutique approach starts at Ingle Vineyard, in Naples overlooking the lake, where he applies many "green" approaches in growing the grapes for his premium line of wines. He and two other people prune by hand the 12,000 vines situated around his home.

Danny Wegman, the CEO of Wegmans who has embarked on his own green project through Wegmans Organic Research Farm, says of Ingle: "He's the most 'sustainable' person I know, who actually lives off his land. He grows much of his own food and stores crops so they can last through the winter...He loves growing and caring for the grapes for his delicious wines."

"Johnny Don't"

Growing up in Pittsford, Ingle spent most of his summers on Seneca Point, that bucolic strip along the west side of Canandaigua lake that looks little changed since the turn of the century. But his family's roots were unquestionably industrial.

Ingle, the oldest of four children, was named after his father, John W. "Jack" Ingle Sr., then owner and president of Rando Machine Corp., a machine manufacturer. John turned out to be a precocious child with a fondness for the atypical.

"My mom called me 'Johnny Don't' when I was growing up," Ingle recalls. "I was always trying things out... I like turning illusion into a reality."

During the late 1960s, Ingle studied teaching at the University of Denver, where he met and married his wife, Josephine. Although she too had industrial family roots, neither pursued a life of commerce.

At the time, the United States was in the midst of a mounting obsession with food, and “health food” became a household term. The couple embraced the notion of organic food and, after graduating, they decided to pursue a life of simplicity.

“I didn’t do much farming or growing when I was growing up. To tell you the truth, I didn’t know dirt from soil. But we were seeking a lifestyle that would let us raise a family and spend time with our kids,” Ingle says.

They scouted out remote areas of the West—British Columbia, Washington, Montana—but didn’t find what they were looking for. Instead, they moved back to the Finger Lakes, spending winters in the Ingles’ cottage and summers in a two-room cabin up the hill with a woodstove and no running water.

John had begun research on organic truck farms and had acquired eight acres around the cabin from the Ingle family, eventually purchasing the adjoining 22 acres when it became available. At one point, the couple helped a neighboring farmer with the grape harvest, learning the basics of handpicking and boxing grapes for the wine industry.

“It was hard physical labor, but we felt connected to the cycle of the seasons and the idea that for thousands of years, all around the world, people had been doing this,” Ingle says.

Farming did not come easy at first. “We had a steep learning curve, and everyone around us said we were bound to fail—they once watched us plant almost 100 asparagus crowns upside down,” Ingle says. “But we had started studying up on wine and decided we were going to create an organic farm sustained by a cash crop: grapes.”

The Birth of a Vineyard

In 1977, Ingle established Heron Hill winery and planted a second vineyard. At the time, conventional wisdom held that the Finger Lakes were too cold for vinifera, the vine species native to Europe that produces most of the world’s wines today. But several growers on Keuka Lake had begun experimenting with vinifera with some success. Ingle decided to pursue both Chardonnay and Riesling.

“It was very cutting edge when John opened Heron Hill and focused on Riesling—it was very intuitive,” says Scott Osborn, president of Fox Run Vineyards on Seneca Lake. According to Osborn and others, in the late 1980s and 1990s, Heron Hill was considered the “flagship of Riesling.” And as the number of wineries in the area grew, more vineyard owners followed suit, making Riesling the flagship variety for the entire region.

“John has always been part of that movement,” Osborn said. “He is quiet and he doesn’t jump out, but he’s always been there participating in a lot of things and promoting the Finger Lakes.”

In 2004, Heron Hill Riesling 2002 attracted national attention when it won “best white” of the San Francisco Wine Show. The winery’s dry Riesling Reserve 2002, 2004 and 2005 and sweet Late Harvest Riesling 2002 have been called “exceptional” by a host of wine critics, including renowned critic Jancis Robinson.

Ingle is quick to credit his winemaker, Thomas Laszlo. And he views some of the challenges of our region as an advantage. “We are blessed in the Finger Lakes to have a niche and an opportunity,” Ingle maintains. “We have smaller production because of the hills and the climate, but Washington (state) will never have the acidity it takes to make a crisp Riesling.”

Back at the Farm

The garden at Ingle Vineyard is testimony to the power of simplicity. With an unspoiled view of the lake, the small plot is packed with herbs, peas, broccoli and all kinds of lettuce, plus unexpected crops such as figs and asparagus. The garden has fed the Ingles and their four children for decades. Growing up, the Ingle children spent many Saturday mornings planting corn, or picking grapes, or pitching in to make apple cider. They also hunted and fished with their father.

“I would say almost 75 percent on our dinner plate comes from what we’ve produced ourselves,” says Ingle.

“Jo and John freeze and can everything,” says Jacobson, a longtime friend and willing dinner guest of the Ingles. “They make these tiny packages, and then take them out to make beautiful little meals.”

The lifestyle is infectious. Walk the garden and you can see the vision, Jacobson notes. “You can see first-hand that it is possible to live off your own property, and that the vision is for anyone.”

Different Leadership

Ingle has played a significant role in fostering Canandaigua’s sense of community. A hockey fan, he provided funding to help build the Greater Canandaigua Civic Center ice-skating facility. He has offered numerous services to Camp Good Days and Special times to help children with cancer and their families. And Heron Hill supports many conservation causes including local Finger Lakes Ducks Unlimited chapters and an effort to increase the river otter population in western New York.

Yet Ingle never loses his focus on growing grapes. “I have 12,000 vines hanging over my head every day,” he says. “I’m the mayor of the town of Ingle Vineyards. I know

all the vines by sight, and I can walk by and say, 'Hey I remember you, you're doing much better this year.' It's much more powerful to have a smaller view."