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03/26/2009

Rao's House Wine? It's From Warren

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Robert D. Summer and his wife, Susan, at The Vineyard at Strawberry Ridge in Warren. Photograph by Walter Kidd.

The most exclusive dining establishment in New York City may be famous Italian restaurant Rao's in East Harlem, which is booked well into 2010. On any given night, the 113-year-old landmark with extremely limited seating is host to some of the city's most elite, famous and powerful clientele. Legend has it that a handful of regulars "own" tables and lease them out like timeshares to eager guests. Even then, service is based upon management's discretion, and rumor has it Madonna was once turned away.

In a restaurant as fashionably restricted as Rao's, one should expect nothing short of the most authentic and delicious Mediterranean cuisine this side of the Atlantic. Based on the jar sauces the restaurant retails, that's exactly what is served. Fresh ingredients and careful blending create flavors sure to please the most discriminating of Italian food connoisseurs.

And, of course, where there's stellar Italian food, fine wine is sure to be featured. Though a wide assortment of wines has long been an integral part of Rao's fare, about two years ago the restaurant introduced its own house wine. One might expect a unique blend created by old world viticulturists in some of the most time-tested Italian vineyards.

Actually, that picture couldn't be further from truth.

From a small, five-acre vineyard overlooking Lake Waramaug (yes, Litchfield County's Lake Waramaug) on the Warren side, The Vineyard at Strawberry Ridge completely oversees the

production of Rao's house wines.

Robert D. Summer, who co-owns the vineyard with his wife, Susan Kasen Summer, told The Litchfield County Times that the recognition being accorded to the vineyard's offerings is further evidence that a high quality wine can in fact come from the Nutmeg State.

"Our biggest marketing hurdle was Connecticut," said Mr. Summer. "The pejorative is that fine wine could not be produced in Connecticut. But we jumped that hurdle." With his vineyard leading the way in terms of the quality of Connecticut wines, their reputation is maturing for the better.

For several years, Rao's, like dozens of other top-shelf restaurants, has carried the vineyard's three wines, Ascot Reserve chardonnay, Ascot Reserve cabernet sauvignon and Ascot Reserve merlot. Because the restaurant had an established relationship with The Vineyard at Strawberry Ridge, and was confident in its ability to make a premier product, Rao's approached the Summers in 2007 with the idea of having them produce a house wine.

After all, the Summers were no strangers to branding house wines, with Strawberry Ridge having overseen the production of a house label for the elite Polpo Restaurant in Greenwich since 2005.

"A number of our accounts were very impressed with our wines and our business ethic, so that started a discussion about creating house branded wines," said Mr. Summer, about the latest direction for his vineyard, which planted its first vines in 1993 and was inspired by the Summers' magical residency in the fabled Tuscan region of Italy in the 1980s.

Now, Rao's varieties are Napa Valley chardonnay, Napa Valley merlot and California cabernet sauvignon, and, though they all fall into the same categories as the Ascot Reserve labels, are made especially to better accommodate the restaurant's refined palate. Rao's also offers these wines at its location in Las Vegas.

Rebecca Belarge, the sales and marketing director for the vineyard, has worked for the Summers for the past 10 years and has been instrumental in overseeing the Rao's line. She has been such an important part of the process, in fact, that Mrs. Summer quipped, "I work for her."

"We came up with wines that would be very different [from Ascot Reserve] and would complement Rao's food," said Ms. Belarge about the products.

The Rao's chardonnay, which spends nine months in oak barrels, offers a bouquet of apple and pear that is framed with light oak nuances. Rao's merlot offers a darker fragrance of black cherry and chocolate that has developed over 18 months in the barrel. And the Rao's cabernet sauvignon delights the nose with a well-balanced blend of fresh tobacco and mint, and, benefiting from more than a year-and-a-half in the barrel, is blessed with a velvety finish.

What about the names of the wines? If they are created in Litchfield County, then why do they seem to have California derivations? Well, and this is also true with the Ascot Reserve merlot and cabernet, the juice comes from vineyards in Napa Valley, Calif., because the New England climate simply isn't conducive to growing the best red wine grapes. Additionally, the infrastructure portion of the business, such as the barreling and the bottling of the wine, is done at a separate vineyard in North Stonington.

However, the grapes for the Ascot Reserve chardonnay, the flagship wine first created in the mid-90s, are grown on site. There is something special about the hills overlooking Lake Waramaug, because the lake water evaporates in the summer and covers the landscape with morning dew. That, apparently, makes for good chardonnay conditions, which may explain why a neighbor of the Vineyard at Strawberry Ridge, the Hopkins Vineyard, has been so successful.

At the Strawberry Ridge business office, which is attached to the Summers' personal art gallery on the more than 20-acre property, the wines are designed and the quality is controlled.

And quality is high. The Vineyard at Strawberry Ridge has imported specialized French oak staves, the wood which composes the wine barrels, to ensure a far higher caliber of output than is typically seen in Connecticut.

"Part of our commitment to this wine comes from our willingness to spend against goals," said Mr. Summer. "Our barrels cost five times that of most domestic barrels. We're going for perfection here, and these staves come from a particular forest that has been at the heart of the French wine industry for years."

The Summers, who are grandparents of seven, were first educated about the winery industry while living in Tuscany and spending time traveling in the neighboring Chianti region. Both hailed from New York, and they took that knowledge with them back to Connecticut, where they have lived since the 1980s.

They started building their current house, a stunningly beautiful estate adjacent to the vineyard, in 1988. Several years later, they bought the vineyard property, and by 1997 they were offering commercially produced chardonnay. The Summers' first red wine didn't arrive until 2004, and the first private label offering, for Polpo, came a year later.

It hasn't always been as easy as it is now. Given that Strawberry Ridge was a soil-up venture, it took four years of planting, planning and maturing before the Summers could market their first bottle.

"The mortality rate for vineyards is very high, because you create significant debt in the beginning," said Mr. Summer, before adding with a laugh, "It's a terrible business to be in."

But the Summers had the business savvy, and the capital, to cruise through those first turbulent few years. Mr. Summer, currently the chairman for a downloadable music Web site, iMesh.com, spent a decade as the president of Sony Music. Mrs. Summer owned and operated her own floral business in the city, and then helped design an advanced 3D imagery system currently utilized in the medical field. But wine is their passion, one they want to share with the world.

Their products are available in select wine shops or can be ordered from their Web site, www.strawberryridge.com. Beginning late last year, the Rao's wine selection was made accessible to the public and is now available in at least two Stew Leonard's locations, in Yonkers, N.Y., and Norwalk, according to Ms. Belarge.

So, with the help of The Vineyard at Summer Ridge, anyone can acquire a tasted of the exclusive dining experience of Rao's Restaurant. For more information, visit the Web site at www.strawberryridge.com.

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