

Beyond the Law: Steve Melchiskey, Vintner

Interview and photos
by Daniel J. Murphy

The words *Maine* and *wine* are seldom mentioned in the same breath, but Steve Melchiskey of Maine Coast Vineyards, LLC, is working to change this. At his working vineyard located at Hurricane Valley in Falmouth—a chicken farm in a former life—Melchiskey carefully tends to row after row of carefully selected grape cultivars. In late May, grape buds break and leaves start to push out from the vines. Within a few weeks, the vines will explode with growth, and will hold with them the hope for a successful harvest.

Although the path from vineyard to bottle is often full of challenges, Melchiskey's years of patient experimentation have provided Maine Coast Vineyards with an array of viable grape cultivars that not only work well in this region, but most importantly, result in the creation of local wines that are pleasing to the palate. Melchiskey, who also maintains a law practice concentrating on alcoholic beverage regulatory affairs, spent time with the *Maine Bar Journal* to discuss his interests.



MBJ: Please tell our readers about Maine Coast Vineyards.

SM: Maine Coast Vineyards was started in the late 1990s. We started as an experimental vineyard in the Hurricane Valley region of Falmouth, on the west side of Falmouth. It's an old agricultural region, which, believe it or not, was formed in the 1600s by a hurricane that came in and wiped out all the trees. With the trees felled, settlers decided to farm the area. It's been an agricultural valley for quite some time. We got started with some friends here, planting a small experimental vineyard. I took 40 to 50 varieties of grapes, 15 vines each, and experimented over two to three years to see what might work. In 1999, a piece of property came up for sale here, an old 14-acre chicken farm that we purchased as our first house. Our agricultural project continued from this time until 2008, when we obtained a farming license to maintain a commercial vineyard on the premises.

MBJ: Where did you obtain your interest in wine?

SM: My interest goes back a long way. I came from a very small rural dairy farming town, but did not do anything agriculturally when I was growing up except gardening. However, in 1976, I lived in Germany as an exchange student on a scholarship with the American Field Service. I lived with a family that was very worldly and they asked me if I would like to go work at a vineyard in the wine region of Germany for a few days. I didn't know any better, so I agreed. The first day I worked all day

long, just picking grapes. It was just something that I fell in love with at 17 years old, and I knew it was something I wanted to do for my life in some way.

MBJ: Growing grapes and making wine have their own distinct challenges. What prompted you to take on the challenge of making wine?

SM: For me, the grapes and wine are difficult to separate. We call ourselves wine growers because we aren't just



wine makers. In the industry, there is a difference in our lexicon. There are people who are winemakers and they never grow a grape, all they do is sit in labs, and blend and make wine. But there are people who are wine growers who choose a piece of land and hope to reflect that land in a product like wine. It's one of those products that actually can reflect the place where it is grown. We call it *terroir*, which is a French word, but basically means that the wine is grown on a piece of land that is unique to any other piece of land in the entire world, from the soil, the way the sun hits the land, to the way the air

flows through the vines, and all those things create a uniqueness that comes through. There's a piece of that that I really love about having a vineyard and having a winery.

MBJ: What kinds of grapes have you found work well in your vineyard?

SM: A lot of the grapes that I feel are most commercially viable here have to ripen early and have to be cold hearty. Everybody says, "Oh, just grow the things you can grow in the Finger Lakes." Well I'm from the Finger Lakes and I went to Cornell, which is right in the Finger Lakes, and I worked at Finger Lakes wineries. We are nothing like the Finger Lakes. First, our season is a good four to six weeks shorter than it is in the Finger Lakes. That means you might be able to grow the grapes for one or two years, but in wine growing what happens over time is that you're not just ripening grapes, you're ripening the wood and the physiological state of the plant. So, you need to have a grape that finishes its ripening early enough to let its wood harden off so that it's hearty for the winter season.

We have tried everything. We've learned that some of the French-American hybrids such as Leon Millot and Maréchal Foch, do okay here, but I think they're still too tender to be a valid commercial variety. Then there is a whole new subset of grapes. A lot of them came out of the University of Wisconsin, some of them came out of Minnesota, and some of them came out of Quebec. These include the St.





Croix, St. Pepin, Le Crescent, Prairie Star and some of the Swenson varieties. These new varieties have been backcrossed to a different branch of the same species of grapes, which allows them to produce very, very good wine and still be extremely cold hearty.

MBJ: What is your output of grapes and wine?

SM: We have two acres and about 1,500 vines here on our property in Falmouth. We also manage another two acres of vines in North Yarmouth at Suri Alpaca Farm. They grow grapes and we use those grapes as well. We help them manage their pruning, planting and variety selection. From our home vineyard here in Falmouth, I shoot for somewhere between four to six tons of grapes. A ton of grapes will make about 60 cases of wine. In all, we aim for about 400 cases, or 5000 bottles, at full production from

Falmouth. If you add in the other two acres in North Yarmouth, it's probably about the same amount.

MBJ: Are your wines available commercially?

SM: Through 2008, we grew grapes on this property essentially for experimental reasons and home use. Most of this was dumped out because it just did not hit the mark. In 2008, we became licensed and finally, after those years of experimentation, figured it out. We had a fairly big harvest in 2009 and produced about 250 to 300 cases of wine that year. Since we use grapes that are grown in Maine, we have a philosophy that Maine artists should be used for the labels. We have had four commercial wines released: two reds, a rosé and a white. We focus on selling to stores and restaurants that have a local connection and a lot of them that deal with local agriculture.

MBJ: Do you have a flagship label or offering?

SM: That's an interesting question. We do not have one because every wine produced has a new label. Our first wine released had a label created by a local artist named Ed Langford, a painter here in Falmouth. He did a picture of a snowplow up in northern Maine in his unique style and everyone knew that as Snowplow Rosé. We did a wine this last fall from an artist named John Swan, also a very big wildlife artist. He did a picture of an evil looking guy that he had painted when he was younger. We called it Spooky Man Red. Once we had an artist who came out to the vineyard and took the seeds and stems and grape skins that were dried, ground them up and used them in handmade paper. We made our white wine that year and each label was a piece of handmade paper on the front of the bottle that was just gorgeous. So those wines will never be repeated. The next one

will be another artist and the one after that another artist. We'll just keep rolling along.

MBJ: What are the biggest challenges you have along the way from field to bottle?

SM: Well, in 2008 we had a fine harvest. In 2009, everything looked great and then we had three weeks of steady rain during bloom. We lost the entire crop. Last year, 2010, looked like it was going to be a spectacular year because we had a wonderful, wonderful spring, but the grape vines budded out two weeks early. Then we got hit with frost on the night of May 14 and lost 80% of the crop. So that's the challenge here, but it's a challenge that exists in a lot of wine growing areas.

MBJ: Any surprises along the way?

SM: One of the things I have to say is that I was never trained as a farmer; I am a lawyer by trade. I'll never forget when I first started out. I was plowing the vineyard with a 1957 Ford 800 Series tractor, thinking that I was very smart. I looked over and in the corner of my property I saw my neighbors, Doug Wilshore Sr. and his son, Doug Jr., who ran a dairy farm called Wilshore Farm. They were chuckling to themselves and kind of kicking the dirt. I drove over and inquired. They said, "Come here, bring your tractor over here, let us show you what to do." They then proceeded to readjust my plow, readjust how everything was sitting and taught me how to plow a field. Without

Doug Sr., before he died, and his son Doug Jr., helping me learn about my equipment and understand the nature of farming, I don't think I would have survived. So, one of the most pleasant surprises I've had is working with other farmers. It has helped me realize that farming is an art and it's an art passed from generation to generation. If we don't maintain that art it will be lost forever. I couldn't really do what I do without having other farmers in my area to help me.

MBJ: Any intersection between your work at the vineyard and your life as a lawyer?

SM: It's huge. Right now I actually own and operate a wine import company. We have five employees in Maine and four in California. The alcoholic beverage world is fraught with regulations and licensing issues. It's a very complex area of law and I've surprised myself at how valuable my law education and my experience as a lawyer have been in helping me to run a business in this world and in the world of wine. Without being a lawyer I couldn't do what I do. It has been invaluable.

MBJ: What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?

SM: Well, two pieces of advice. My wife supported me when I left a very nice San Francisco law practice to go to work for a wine shop. We took a huge pay cut because I wanted to work in the wine world. She said, "Do what you love first and worry about the rest

of it later." My family has helped me in every stage, from picking the grapes to helping me in the vineyard in the spring to helping put labels on the bottles and cork wine in the winery.

And the second piece of advice actually came from Doug Wilshore Sr., who taught me about agriculture and farming. He said, "Take your time, don't rush. Farming is not something that can be done quickly." Every year is a new year and one year or two years does not a farm make. It takes a long time to build and to appreciate the things you're going to face along the way. In 2008, we had a huge harvest and great wines and in 2009 and 2010 we got wiped out. Those are harsh lessons. Take your time.



Daniel J. Murphy is a shareholder in Bernstein Shur's Litigation Practice Group, where his practice concentrates on commercial and business litigation matters.

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