

The sweet promise of noble rot

by Thomas Pellechia

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Late Harvest Chardonnay might offer a once-in-a-lifetime taste.

The Finger Lakes summer of 2005 was one of the hottest, driest on record. From extreme weather can come extremely rare wine.

At Heron Hill Winery on the west side of Keuka Lake, the dry heat brought something that owner John Ingle said he hadn't experienced in more than 30 years in the business.

"2005 was the first time I have ever seen chardonnay picked so late and picked with noble rot," Ingle said. It's a nearly unheard of combination that, to a winemaker, brings mouth-watering possibilities. For Ingle, the combination has led to Heron Hill Vineyards 2005 Late Harvest Chardonnay.

When I heard about it, I had to ask, "What gives?" I would expect such a thing from a grape like Riesling, which matures late and is relatively thick-skinned. Riesling is better able to survive an extended growing season and the vagaries that come with it, making it one of the premium grapes in the world for the production of lush, intensely sweet, late-harvest dessert wines. Chardonnay, though, is a relatively thin-skinned grape; it matures weeks before Riesling.

This spring, I met with Ingle and Heron Hill's

winemaker, Thomas Lazlo, for some answers and, luckily, the first taste of this wine as they worked on blending it.

Lazlo explained the path to this unusual wine. "When a normally cool grape-growing climate like ours meets an unusually hot growing season, the result is early ripening," said Lazlo. "But if the season is extremely dry, the potential for reduced mold damage gives winemakers the opportunity to allow an early ripening grape like chardonnay to hang on the vine a little longer."

The 2005 season was so dry that even thin-skinned grapes like chardonnay went into the October harvest relatively unblemished. Letting the grapes hang longer than normal brings grapes to fuller sugar ripeness, which is exactly what Lazlo advised Ingle to do with a select segment of his chardonnay vineyards. (Ingle grows a large portion of the grapes for Heron Hill wines on his farm near Canandaigua Lake.)

Right after Lazlo's suggestion, a mid-October tumult drenched the region for 10 days. As Ingle told it, "I followed Thomas's advice, and then after the rains stopped in October, I looked at the small remaining section of the chardonnay crop and saw that the grapes were turning gray."

He knew exactly what that meant. When fully ripe grapes hang on the vine into the autumn, a mold named botrytis cinerea can develop on the skins. Depending on the weather, this mold can be either dangerous or friendly. When the mold is friendly, it is called "the noble rot," which is exactly what Ingle had on his hands.

Friendly noble rot appears when moisture is followed by a lot of sunshine. Once established,

the mold minutely penetrates grape skins. If the moisture is too much for too long, the skins can split open and that is the end of that. But if dry air follows before that, the noble rot's slight skin penetration allows only some of the water and juice of the grapes to evaporate.

According to Lazlo, the time to pick grapes subject to noble rot comes when "the grapes develop a mold moustache but not a full mold beard." When the time arrives, the grapes are near raisin-like but, having lost only about a third of their juice, are not fully dried out. The sugars and acids are concentrated, and so the juice is intense, lush, and sweet.

When the sun came out after the rains, the dry, cool autumn air kept potential dangers at bay. Of course, there is always a little loss. It took two weeks and two passes through the small plot of vineyard to remove the grapes that had split. On the third pass, only the cleanest, noblest-rottenest grapes remained for picking.

Grapes subject to noble rot must be handled extremely carefully so they don't split. On Oct. 31, the chardonnay grapes, with their botrytis moustache, were hand-picked and carefully placed into five-gallon pails. The small containers limited the weight of the grapes so the ones on top wouldn't press open the ones at the bottom during the trip from Canandaigua to Keuka Lake. Once at the winery, the grapes were quickly pressed in a few passes to be sure to get at all the juice. A cool, slow fermentation began, and then the wine was split into two lots—half went into Hungarian oak and half into stainless steel storage.

A few months later, Lazlo had drawn off a

small volume of the wine from each storage vessel, mixed it into a carafe, and was about to let Ingle and me taste it. Lazlo had made wine in Hungary, where the production of a lush, sweet dessert wine is an historical marvel in the famous Tokaj region. I could see his excitement as he poured the 2005 Heron Hill Late Harvest Chardonnay into the large stemware.

Still young and unfiltered, the wine was cloudy, and on first sniff—like all pre-filtered young wines—it gave off a slight yeasty aroma. But underneath that aroma I detected the scent of flower blossoms—a promise of things to come.

The wine had a luring, lush viscosity, not syrupy but silky and full, almost like cream—a sweet cream. Deep within the middle of its lush body came a hint of clover honey; then, as the wine went down, its light, clean snap of acidity finished the experience the way a period ends a perfectly lucid sentence.

This wine is destined for something very different from the more commonly produced late-harvest Riesling, which, as it ages, generally becomes intensely caramel and minty. The promised direction of Heron Hill's 2005 Late Harvest Chardonnay seems to be closer to another late-harvest wine, the French Sauternes, which ages in a more delicate, citrus-like structure.

But we won't know for sure until the wine's release in September. And with just 160 cases produced, only a few people will be lucky enough to find out.