

Toasting (and roasting) Bernie

Area vintners and grape growers to honor Boskydel owner at benefit dinner

BY RICK COATES

Every industry has them — the ones that are simply known by their first name. When talking music, just say “Elvis” or “Madonna” and in politics “Rudy” or “Arnold” and the last names just are not necessary. In local wine circles you just need to mention the name “Bernie,” and everyone knows whom you are talk-

ing about. There is and only will be one Bernie Rink, and depending on how you size that up everyone will agree, “Thank God.”

He is called by some the “Godfather” of the northern Michigan wine region that now boasts 20 wineries with five more projected to open in a couple of years. But Bernie Rink of Boskydel Vineyards never set out to start a wine region, he simply wanted to make good affordable table wines.

He has succeeded on all accounts and now area wineries, grape growers and his customers want to come together

to honor him. At a dinner on November 10, 2005 at the Hagerty Center, fans of Bernie will gather to celebrate and “roast and toast” him. All proceeds will go to a scholarship fund, established by area vintners and grape growers to benefit the Great Lakes Culinary Institute.

This marks a big year for Bernie Rink. According to his son Jim Rink, (a successful wine writer) Bernie first planted grapes 40 years ago. In 1975 he opened his tasting room. Add in the fact that he and his wife Suzanne are closing in on their 50th wedding anniversary, there are a lot of milestones to celebrate.

Bernie, the former director of the library at Northwestern Michigan College, came up with the idea of planting grapes while reading a book about grape growing and realizing that the best wine regions of the world were on the 45th Parallel. Coincidentally Bernie owned 16 acres of land on the 45th Parallel in the heart of the Leelanau Peninsula.

His five sons eventually built a baseball diamond on some of the acreage next to the grapes Bernie had planted. It appeared that the ball diamond might be safe when Bernie bought 40 more acres, but that wasn't the case. The



Photo/Rick Coates

San Francisco Chronicle wine critic Wilfred Wong (left) discusses northern's Michigan wine region with Bernie Rink (right).

ball diamond gave way to more grapes. Some believe Bernie truly needed the space; others say that by eliminating the diamond he freed up his sons from their baseball pursuits for “slave labor” to work in the vineyard and to help build the tasting room and winemaking operation in 1975.

Jim Rink remembers those early days of “slave labor” as actually being fun. The brothers even made up jingles they would sing while working:

“We work at Boskydel, the closest thing to hell. We’re never treated well, at slave camp Boskydel.”

Bernie has numerous loyal customers, some who venture hundreds of miles annually to buy his wines. While vinifera

grapes (Chardonnay, Merlot, Pinot Noir) are essentially household names, Bernie believed that French Hybrids would grow the best here. He believed the hearty hybrids would be better suited for northern Michigan winters. Even while other wineries have opened and are growing vinifera, Bernie remains loyal to his hybrids.

“We wouldn’t want it any other way,” said Paul Hughes of Lake Orion, a 25 year customer of Boskydel. “We go to dinner parties and everyone has a Chardonnay and a Merlot. No one really pays attention, but we serve Bernie’s Vignoles and de Chaunac and not only do people love them they have never heard of these style of grapes. Then it leads us to talking about Bernie and then our friends want to go visit.”

That can be a good thing or a bad thing. Bernie has his own customer service techniques, and while they work for him, Disney has yet to adopt them. Some on the peninsula even refer to him as “The Wine Nazi,” in reference to the “Soup Nazi” on *Seinfeld*. How you see Bernie is really dependent on how you get to know him.

Come in with seven friends and buy one bottle and you’d better not let the door hit you on the “you know what” on the way out. Come in with seven friends and have everyone buy a case and you have a friend for life. Being on Bernie’s

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