

A wow of a Penna. wine

By Craig LaBan

Inquirer Restaurant Critic

Gino Razzi has heard his share of wisecracks. Making wine in Pennsylvania, it seems, has long been a grand cru invitation to cynicism.

But the double-takes acquire an extra snap, and the remarks a deeper chuckle of disbelief, when I tell people I'm excited about Penns Woods, Razzi's ambitious new winery in Eddystone. This blue-collar burg, slipped into an industrial zone between I-95 and the Delaware River, just beyond the airport and the Boeing plant, doesn't exactly conjure images of the Napa Valley.

"Where are the vineyards?" jibed one friend, "at the end of the runways?"

"So," quipped another, "are the grapes crushed by the toes of Eagles cheerleaders?"

The good-natured Razzi laughs at the zingers ("I know I have an uphill battle," he says with a shrug as Italian as his rich accent). But the Abruzzi-born Razzi, 64, a well-known wine importer and a maker of highly rated wines in Italy, knows what he's doing around grapes. His "Symposium," a profoundly good montepulciano d'Abruzzo, has won 90 points or better from the Wine Spectator ever since the first vintage (1997) was issued.

And as he led me past the state-of-the-art winery equipment that fills the unmarked stucco building across Saville Avenue from his importing business, Viva Vino, it quickly became clear that Penns Woods wines are no joke. When we entered the tasting room, I saw his wines posed for a test-sip against two of France's most famous bottles.

"When you want to do something good, you can do it anywhere if you have the passion, dedication and knowledge," Razzi said.

He then proceeded to pour his 2005 Ameritage, a \$55 Bordeaux-style red blend, against a Bordeaux legend, a 1998 Chateau Mouton-Rothschild that runs \$253 in Pennsylvania. We sipped his 2005 Chardonnay Reserve (\$33.50) against a 2003 Corton-Charlemagne from Laboure-Roi (about \$100), one of Burgundy's most storied whites.

Remarkably, the Penns Woods wines held their own quite well - even if they did not have quite the resonance or complexity of those French classics. The Ameritage, mostly cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc and merlot (with a splash of nebbiolo), was plush with licorice, cassis and cedar, riper and more balanced than almost any other local red I've tasted. The chardonnay was touched with butterscotch and zesty tangerine, but also braced with a long and flinty, mineral finish. Other Penns Woods wines, such as the lively sauvignon blanc and rich gold pinot grigio, were also impressive.

"These are some of the best wines made yet in Pennsylvania," agreed Mark Chien of the Penn State Cooperative Extension, who did a similar tasting a few weeks before mine. "Gino is one of the most talented winemakers we have. . . . His chardonnay is exceptional, and I thought it held up to the Corton pretty well."

Such praise marks an impressive debut for Penns Woods, which Razzi officially opened in December with vintages dating to 2002, and prices ranging from \$18.50 for roses and \$23.50 for house reds and white blends, all the way up to the high-end Ameritage.

It is one of the latest additions to a boom in Pennsylvania wineries, which have nearly tripled since 1999, from 42 to 122 in late 2007, according to the Pennsylvania Wine Association. There has been an overall uptick recently in the pursuit of quality. But Razzi's extreme commitment to making only the highest-level wines possible is a departure from the approach taken by many of the state's wineries, which feel obliged to create a wider range of styles and prices to appeal to a mass-market audience.

Penns Woods' grapes, it turns out, are not grown in an airport haze of jet fumes, but about 20 miles west in the considerably more sylvan setting of Chadds Ford, on a hilly 16-acre plot cleansed by a persistent breeze ("good for preventing rot," Razzi says). The previously rambling 30-year-old vines of the former Smithbridge Winery, though, needed serious pruning.

"Anybody with any brains wouldn't have done this," said Razzi, standing amid vines that he'd just chopped down to nubs and tiny tendrils in an effort to coax greater intensity from the old roots. It's a gamble that could reduce his yield to a third - or destroy the vines completely.

"But I want to make the wines I want to make," said Razzi, who has invested nearly a million dollars in this project since he began crafting local wines in 2002. "If I can't? Well, at least I tried! At least I'll die happy."

It's a big commitment, as post-retirement projects go. But for Razzi, a Marine and Vietnam veteran whose first job after immigrating to America in 1962 was digging graves in Upper Darby, "it's a way to give something back for Pennsylvania."

The name, with its evocation of William Penn, he says, is part of that homage.

Jan Waltz, whose well-regarded Waltz Vineyards in Manheim, Lancaster County, supplies about a third of Penns Woods' grapes (as well as fruit for a dozen other wineries), said Razzi's approach was unique. He is exacting down to the details of how he wants his fruit picked.

What happens inside the winery, though, is ultimately what distinguishes Penns Woods. Both Chien and Waltz remarked on Razzi's fanatical cleanliness, as well as his superb palate and winemaking instincts, refined by nearly four decades in the importing business. But Razzi's cutting-edge production equipment also puts modern technology to its full advantage.

The centerpiece is a \$55,000 "rotary fermenter" from Italy that looks like a jet engine. A fermenter is the tank where crushed grapes undergo their crucial transformation from juice into

wine, and Razzi says this machine, of which there are only a handful in the United States, extracts the maximum essence from his fruit. That is essential, especially for reds, in a region that often struggles with ripeness.

Compared to a conventional \$6,000 fermenter - an open vertical tank in which the "cap" of floating skins is manually punched down with a hand tool to create flavor-releasing contact with the juice - the horizontal rotary fermenter, sealed and oxygen-free, gently tumbles the constantly immersed skins inside a central basket like a giant washing machine set on slow-motion spin cycle. Typical fermenters, Razzi estimates, leave up to 40 percent of the grapes' flavor behind in their skins.

"We extract everything those grapes have to give."

The cost of producing this wine - including several years maturing in \$1,000 French oak barrels, stacked in the chilly aging room located across a courtyard from the production building - is significant for a small winery that aims to release only 2,000 cases a year.

But if the quality is there, converts can be had.

Anthony Masapollo, a managing partner at the upscale Center City Italian restaurant Le Castagne, had never put a Pennsylvania wine on his list in more than a decade of wine buying. That changed after he sampled Penns Woods, largely out of respect for Razzi's reputation as an importer and producer of his Symposium wine.

"I thought it was fantastic compared to other wines from the East Coast," said Masapollo, who lists both the Ameritage and pinot grigio. "When people see 'PA,' it is a little harder sell. ... But people I've served it to have been very impressed."

At the Dilworthtown Inn, wine director Stephen McKinney gave the Ameritage to his entire staff in a blind tasting.

"Some guessed Washington, others guessed Rhone," he said, "but they were quite surprised to learn it was from 7 miles away from here. They all thought it was excellent."

Though it comes with a sticker shock rarely seen from the vineyards of Pennsylvania, Chien and Waltz both believe Ameritage is priced competitively compared to second- and third-growth Bordeaux, not to mention the typical \$50 Napa Valley meritage.

"It's better than your average Napa wine by a long shot," said Waltz.

"I'd argue Gino's wines are great values," said Chien.

Still, Masapollo wishes it were a shade more enticingly priced. The \$85 fee for Ameritage on his list is "not experimental." As a result, Le Castagne has also begun offering it by the glass for \$15 so more of the curious can get a taste.

That 6-ounce sip of Ameritage may be just what those wisecracking Pennsylvania wine cynics need.

Where to Buy

Penns Woods wines are currently sold at a handful of restaurants, including Le Castagne (1920 Chestnut St., 215-751-9913) and the Dilworthtown Inn (1390 Old Wilmington Pike, West Chester, 610-399-1390).

They are also available for sale retail by appointment only at the winery, 1010 Saville Ave., Eddystone, 610-872-5320. A public tasting room is expected to open by mid-May at the vineyard, 124 Beaver Valley Rd., Chadds Ford. For more information, go to: www.pennswoodswinery.com.

com.

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