How did a wine from a Penn Stater's obscure Pennsylvania winery end up on the most famous wine list in the state?

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PHOTOS BY SCOTT GOLDSMITH

a *wine's* time

It's a joke. It has to be.

Here, at the most prestigious restaurant in Pennsylvania—Le Bec-Fin in Philadelphia—is a 2006 Pinot Gris. That's not the funny part. A Pinot Gris certainly belongs here, on this famed wine list of classic French wines, served in a dining room that looks like a Manet painting, with crystal chandeliers and waiters who literally announce "Voilà!" as they serve meals of roasted squab breast and leg confit that can run (with wine, of course) upwards of $200 a pop.

But this Pinot Gris? It's not from Alsace. Or the Loire Valley. Or even California. No, this Pinot Gris is from Pennsylvania, from grapes picked a few miles from Lake Erie and pressed at a little winery there called Presque Isle Wine Cellars.

Which is why it must be a joke. The only grapes that grow well in that corner of the state are Concords and Niagaras, right? Grape-juice grapes. (It's no wonder Welch's largest manufacturing plant is right down the road.) Wines made there are the kinds that teenagers sneak into the prom, that great-aunts serve with meatloaf, that people who drink White Zinfandel make fun of. Nobody takes those wines seriously. Who really takes any Pennsylvania wines seriously? A *Philadelphia Inquirer* wine columnist once described the state's wines, collectively, as "painful to drink."

But the wines? They are a-changing. Or, at least over the past 15 years, the wine industry in Pennsylvania has started to catch up with New York and even California. Vineyards have succeeded in doing what once seemed impossible: growing many of the European grapes that everyone knows and loves, like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chardonnay, Riesling. Awards have been won all over the state, including a very shiny bronze medal bestowed on Presque Isle's 2006 Pinot Gris at the 2007 American Wine Society Commercial Wine Competition. But still. It's one thing to gain enough respect to be a suitable hostess gift and another entirely to stand up alongside, say, a Château Cheval Blanc at a restaurant that's received Mobil's Five Star and AAA's Five Diamond awards.

Except ... that's exactly where Presque Isle's Pinot Gris is. And it's not alone: Along with Presque Isle's 2002 Syrah and its 2005 Cabernet Franc, they're the only Pennsylvania wines on Le Bec-Fin's list.

"It's the biggest thing that's happened to us," says **Doug Moorhead '56 Agr,** sitting at a wooden picnic table in the town of North East, Pa., just outside the tasting room at Presque Isle Wine Cellars.

In the Pennsylvania wine industry, Moorhead is, quite simply, "The Man." Not only did he lead the charge back in the 1960s to convince the state to legalize commercial wineries, but he opened one of the first two in 1969 while still farming the 165-acre vineyard that's been in his family for seven generations. In the book *American Vintage: The Rise of American Wine,* author Paul Lukacs counts Moorhead as one of the country's few "agrarian artistes" who "pioneered ... grape growing and winemaking outside California." Today there are more than 120 wineries in Pennsylvania. The state's wine industry generates $661 million each year and, in 2005, lured 877,000 tourists. Moorhead's

SIP BY SIP: Presque Isle Wine Cellars is raking in the awards, showing up on some very prestigious wine lists, and making a name for the Pennsylvania wine industry. That's right, *Pennsylvania.*

winery alone produces 30 different types of wines.

It all sounds good, yes. But when wine aficionados hear it—when they're told that a wine from a "podunk winery," as Moorhead himself describes it, is on the list at Le Bec-Fin—they raise an eyebrow. How in the world did that wine get there? And, more importantly, how does it taste?

Moorhead remembers the exact moment when he realized something extraordinary was about to happen.

He was sitting in his office at Presque Isle. It was 17 years ago, late August 1991, unusually early for the grape harvest to begin. But it had been an unusual season—it warmed up early, stayed in the 80s all summer, and rain fell every time the vines needed a drink. It would seem that the Lake Erie region, with that crazy lake-effect weather, would be the worst place on Earth to try to grow something as weather-dependent as a wine grape, which likes two things—to be warm but not too warm and to be dry but not too dry. But there's something special about the area—the sandy soil, the breezes from the water, the plateau along the lake that tames the weather a bit.

While the conditions outside Presque Isle Wine Cellars were tame on that late-summer day in 1991, things were nuts on the inside. Ever since the harvest had begun, phones were ringing off the hook, staff were packing up orders of winemaking equipment (which the winery sells), and amateur winemakers were stopping by to buy some of the just-pressed juice to turn into their own wine. Moorhead could barely concentrate.

And then, he smelled it.

He stood up and walked outside, following his nose out back to the gigantic stainless-steel pressing machine where the juice is separated from the skins and seeds. The Merlot grapes that had been fermenting in wooden crates behind the winery were being dumped into the press. Their aroma permeated the air like a magic spell.

"That was the best-smelling wine I'd ever smelled," Moorhead says, and he was right—many of his 1991 wines went on to win gold medal after gold medal and showed the world that Presque Isle Wine Cellar could do more than just grape juice. Even today, he considers 1991 to be "our year of the century."

But, now, it's a new century, and Moorhead gazes into a crate of fermenting Merlot grapes from the 2008 harvest, picked the day before. His burgundy Henley shirt is the same color as the grapes in the crate, which might seem intentional, except that Doug Moorhead isn't that type of guy. He doesn't look like a winery owner, not in the Francis Ford Coppola image of winery owners, not with his tousled salt-and-pepper hair, his thick Coke-bottle glasses, his loping gait. Actually, he looks more like a farmer, which is fitting because, at 74, Moorhead is as much the farmer he was in 1958, when he began helping his father with the family's grape farm.

Actually, Moorhead had been working the farm since

he was a kid. When he graduated from high school in 1952, he knew one thing—he did not want to be a farmer. But when he enrolled at Penn State in the fall, he found, buried deep in the ag college, in the horticulture department, a major that appealed to him: pomology, the study of growing fruit. While he learned a lot of basic chemistry and bred a gazillion fruit flies, only one course in all his four years at school focused on grapes.

But Moorhead was definitely focused on grapes, even more so after he graduated, joined the Army, and headed to Germany, where he fell in love with all those zesty German wines. He came home in 1958 with a plan—to grow European grapes in Pennsylvania, make wine, and sell it. It was a crazy idea. Not only had no commercial wineries been operating in Pennsylvania since Prohibition, but any wine that was produced had to be sold through the Liquor Control Board, which didn't have the staff or the desire to promote local wines. But Moorhead began experimenting with European grapes on his dad's farm and, after a lot of false starts, he found that Riesling and Cabernet Franc did pretty well in that Lake Erie soil. Better yet, as the wines he made from those grapes matured, he discovered that they were ... kind of ... good.

So, during a meeting of the local horticultural society, he casually mentioned that he thought producing wine might help grape growers. Suddenly, he found himself chairing a committee charged with convincing the state legislature that starting a wine industry was a reasonable idea. Five years of study and dozens of trips to Harrisburg later, the legislature passed a law permitting wineries to make wine from local fruit and to sell that wine directly to the public. In 1969, Presque Isle Wine Cellars began producing its own wine and, in 1970, Moorhead and his wife, Marlene, officially opened the winery for business.

Ever since then, like all vintners everywhere, they've had good years. And they've had bad years. There were the dark ones in the 1970s during the recession. Then, in the 1980s, Gov. **Tom Ridge '72 JD DSL** gave the industry a boost by establishing a wine competition as part of the annual Farm Show in Harrisburg. Then, in the early 1990s, the Department of Commerce found that wineries were at the top of the list of tourist attractions. Then there was the disastrously cold, wet season of 2003. Then there was the disastrously cold, wet season of 2004. And, lately, the whole industry in Pennsylvania faces a potential setback, as the legislature considers a bill that would stop state wineries from shipping directly to consumers in the state and, instead, require them to sell through the state stores only.

"The politics in this state are brutal," says Mark Chien, a viticulture expert hired by Penn State Cooperative Extension in 1999 to advise grape growers. "If I were Doug Moorhead, I would have given up decades ago."

But even though Moorhead and his wife now share ownership of the winery with his brother- and sister-in-law, he continues to fight the fight, maybe because he's felt the rewards in a way that not many winemakers have. Sure, other Pennsylvania wineries pro-

HOW TO PICK WINE

You walk into a store to buy wine ... now what? **Brian Freedman '99 Lib,** director of education at the Wine School of Philadelphia, uncorks some advice:

1. Pay attention when you're drinking wine, so you know what you like before you even go to a store. Fruity? Earthy? Tannic? Better yet, keep a wine journal and bring it with you.
2. Ask the salesperson, "What would you recommend that's interesting and inexpensive?"
3. Don't be swayed by a cute label. It doesn't necessarily mean "good wine." It means "good marketing."
4. Don't be afraid of a screw cap.
5. You shouldn't have to spend more than $15 for a good bottle of everyday wine.
6. Check out the ratings by critics or magazines like *Wine Spectator* that stores post next to wines. If you buy a wine with a solid score—and, out of 100, that's the mid- to upper-80s and above—you can feel pretty comfortable it'll be a good wine.

THREE WINES FREEDMAN CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT:

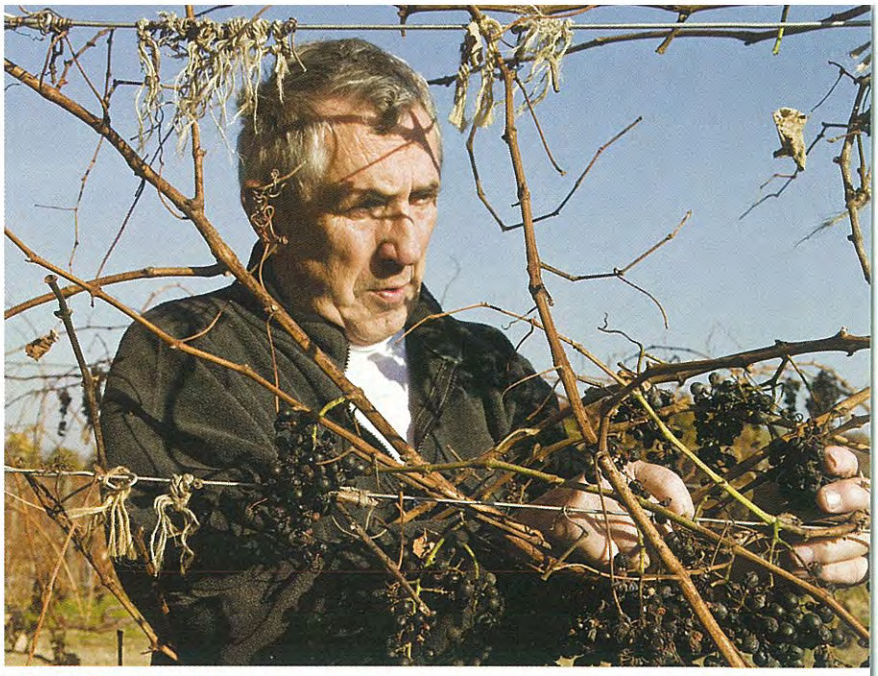
RED: Las Rocas de San Alejandro Garnacha, about $10. "Great with anything from meat to pizza."

WHITE: J.J. Christoffel Erben Riesling Spätlese, $30. "Fruity, sweet, and comes with a screw cap!"

SPARKLING: Marques de Gelida Cava, $15. "Open this the next time you order take-out Chinese. You'll feel decadent. Like you're treating yourself right." —*VG*

duce good wines, like Allegro in York County and Chaddsford outside Philadelphia. And some of those wines have also landed in notable restaurants. But, then, Moorhead took it one step further—to the most selective list around.

Moorhead credits a French wine agent named Antoine George. George got the wine in for a tasting at Le Bec-Fin. ("If I'd gone to them," Moorhead says, "I never would have had an audience.") But Le Bec's sommelier certainly didn't buy case upon case of a Lake Erie wine because the salesman was French. Customers, particularly international ones, had been requesting local wines, and Le Bec needed to find some that were extraordinary.



WILL WORK FOR WINE: In the 1960s, Doug Moorhead helped convince the Pennsylvania legislature to allow grape growers to open vineyards and sell to the public.

Mark Chien thinks that all of this means more than just cachet for Moorhead. "I'd argue," he says, "that getting into good restaurants and being poured by the glass is how you put a wine region on the map."

Maybe the joke here, then, isn't the wines in the Pennsylvania region but the perception Pennsylvanians have of their regional wines. Because, no matter how many awards Moorhead wins or how many fine restaurants stock his wine, he still hears stories like this one:

Last year, a friend of his was at a political fundraiser just a few miles from Moorhead's winery. The friend watched as a state representative from Harrisburg approached the bar and asked for a glass of a local wine.

"We don't have any," the bartender said.

"Why not?" the woman asked.

"Well, we don't consider them in our purchases."

A bottle of the 2006 Pinot Gris from Presque Isle Wine Cellars is sitting on the marble bar at Le Bec-Fin in Philadelphia. The restaurant's sommelier, Brian McMahon, stands behind the bar, dressed in a crisp white shirt and a light blue tie even though the restaurant won't open for dinner for another four hours. Sitting at the bar is **Brian Freedman '99 Lib,** director of wine education at the Wine School of Philadelphia. He's never tasted this wine before and, though he hasn't said it out loud to anyone here, he's dubious about it.

Freedman has been drinking wine since he was 6 years old, his father leading him down to the cellar every night to help choose the wine for dinner. He's now a trained sommelier who writes about wine and teaches about wine and travels all over the world to taste wine and hangs out with people, like the Le Bec sommelier, who know wine. And, of all the Pennsylvania wines he's tasted, none of them "really scream at me," he says.

McMahon pours a splash of the 2006 Pinot Gris into a glass. Freedman holds the stem, plunges his nose into the glass and takes a deep breath, then spins the wine around. Another breath. Another spin. He takes a sip, then aerates the wine by gurgling near the front of his mouth, sounding a little like Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs*. Then he lifts a plastic cup off the bar and spits the wine into it.

"It really has a physical presence," he says. "It's waxy on the tongue. Nice acid. Fruity. Crisp. Really ... really nice." He sounds shocked because he is shocked, just like so many customers are when they order the wine. More than one have, upon tasting, exclaimed, "Oh my God!" It's a shame that Doug Moorhead has never heard this happen. He's never eaten at Le Bec-Fin. In fact, he may not even be able to taste his own 2006 Pinot Gris anymore because he doesn't have any more of it. It's in other hands now.

McMahon, the sommelier, pours a glass for himself. He sniffs and swirls and tastes.

"I think it's great," he says. He likes the taste. He likes the fact that it's local. And, as a sommelier who helps customers choose wine, he sure likes the price point, which is inexpensive for Le Bec—$55 a bottle and $12 a glass.

"This wine surprised the hell out of me," Freedman agrees, sipping it again. "I love to be surprised."

Vicki Glembocki, who grew up in Erie, is a freelance writer in Philadelphia. In January, Da Capo will publish the paperback edition of her book *The Second Nine Months: One Woman Tells the REAL Truth About Becoming a Mom. Finally.*