

# The Suffolk Times.

## Reds & whites and now silver Pindar celebrates 25 years

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PECONIC – Twenty-five years ago, Dr. Herodotus “Dan” Damianos looked out over a sea of young grapevines and wondered what he was getting into. The medical doctor from Stony Brook, who loved wine but had no agricultural experience, had planted about 30 acres of chardonnay on a potato field he bought from the Krupskis, a longtime farming family across the road.

“In the beginning, we had to struggle to find out what we were, and what we were doing,” Dr. Damianos recalled. “I thought, gee life is wonderful and I like what I’m doing, but this is different and challenging. I saw so much potential for a wine region in the area and I wanted to be a part of that.”

It would take at least a couple of years to pull in a decent sized harvest from those vines and make the first white wine in an adjacent potato barn, and many more years before Pindar Vineyards, named for the famous Greek poet, became Long Island’s largest winery.

Now, Pindar Vineyards is celebrating a milestone, its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, with a round of special events and customer offers. The business encompasses about 550 acres and produces up to 80,000 cases of wine a year, dwarfing all other wineries in the region, most of which make fewer than 20,000 cases a year. The facilities at Pindar include a huge winemaking building and a large separate tasting room building that was recently renovated to better accommodate the crowds that “belly up to the bar” three-deep every busy summer and fall weekend.

And, most gratifying to the doctor, his three grown sons, Alex, Jason and Pindar, who had little choice as kids but to labor in the vineyards, seem to have enjoyed the experience and have become integral parts of the business. They are the general manager of sister winery Duck Walk Vineyards on the South Fork, winemaker at Pindar, and vineyard manager at Pindar, respectively. Dr. Damianos’s wife, Barbra with daughters Alethea and Eurydice pursue other interests.

Last week, the annual harvest started again, with tons of grapes arriving in gondolas from Pindar’s fields onto the crush pad, to be processed into the 2005 vintage, which many say is going to be the best ever.

“It’s going to be a great year, definitely,” said Dr. Damianos, who’s in his 70’s and still pours wine in the tasting room, gives tours on the weekends and talks about his wine with the same high level of energy and enthusiasm he’s had for decades.

Pindar’s impact on the Long Island wine industry is undeniable. From 1980 to about the mid 1990s Pindar was arguably the “anchor” winery of the blossoming industry, a destination for day-trippers from the rest of Long Island, the New York City area and beyond. People came out to visit Pindar because they had heard about it from friends or had bought a bottle Winter White at their local liquor store and fallen in love with the best-selling, sweet white blend.

Once on the North Fork, these visitors discovered that Pindar wasn’t alone. It was one of the first wave of wineries established, including the founding Hargrave Vineyards, Lenz Winery, Bedell Cellars, Peconic Bay Vineyards and Pugliese Vineyards. They tasted Long Island wine, and many were converted to singing its praises, countering the critics who often gave the winemakers’ early efforts a bad rap.

## Pindar Celebrates...

Now, the region has emerged as one of the country's premier wine-producing areas, especially for the red varietal merlot, with over 3,000 acres under vines, and the crowds spill over in more than 30 East End wineries.

Pindar found its direction early on, when Dr. Damianos decided to produce wines for every level of wine drinker. Novices cut their teeth on Winter White, a Spring Splendor and other crowd-pleasing blends, and longtime wine fans sought out the top Bordeaux-style red blend, Mythology, the esoteric late harvest Gewürztraminer and a bone-dry bubbly called Cuvée Rare.

"We also wanted to offer the wines at sensible prices, because one of the worst things we could have done was overpriced our wines," said Dr. Damianos. "There was too much competition from California and other regions to do that. There still is. Charging \$25 for a bottle of merlot may work in some tasting rooms, but it doesn't work on the general market."

Deciding to be a big producer—big in local terms—came easily. It was a matter of simple economics. "If you produce 10,000 cases, it doesn't cost double to produce 20,000," he said.

Looking back, Dr. Damianos recalled the years it took to learn how to be a grape farmer. He talks about discovering from his Jason, who studied in France, that close Bordeaux spacing in the vineyards would be better than wide California spacing, and embarking on a campaign of interplanting the existing fields.

"I'm no confident that we know what works well here on Long Island and I think we'll continue to learn and grow," he said.

Dr. Damianos also fondly remembered legendary winery cat Hobson, a huge lethargic grey beast that once won a weigh-off with Bedell's resident fat cat, Blackie, at a swanky wine event at Pindar's outdoor pavilion. Hobson passed away this spring after a lifetime of sleeping on Pindar's copper tasting bar, oblivious to the adoring crowds that gathered around him.

"People ask for him all the time," said the doctor. "There will never be another cat like Hobson."