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67 HAMPTON ROAD, STE. 5, SOUTHAMPTON, NY 11968

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MALIN AKERMAN

A LONG IN YEARS



*Milestone anniversaries abound
for some of the Hamptons' most
celebrated entrepreneurs.*

BY MATTHEW WEXLER

THE HAMPTONS HAS LONG BEEN A DESTINATION FOR DREAMERS. SOME ARRIVED WITH A VISION, OTHERS STUMBLED UPON THEIR SUCCESSES. AS SEVERAL HOMEGROWN ENTERPRISES CELEBRATE THEIR REMARKABLE ACHIEVEMENTS THIS SUMMER, IT'S PRIDE, PERSEVERANCE AND DEVOTION THAT UNITE THEM IN PROMINENCE.

EARLY BEGINNINGS

"We made a logo, and then I guess it was official," jokes Art of Eating's Cheryl Stair, who with her husband and business partner, John Kowalenko, celebrates its 30th anniversary catering Hamptons affairs. "We didn't intend to do this. We were newly married and both of us came from hospitality backgrounds. I was working in a restaurant, and the chef sent me out for catering jobs. Eventually, it took on a life of its own."

The couple kept pace with the region's emerging scene and has taken each new challenge in stride. "In the beginning, you'd be going 'out East,' not to 'the Hamptons,'" says Kowalenko of the now commonplace moniker. The couple kept their noses to the grindstone, but it was a chance meeting with Martha Stewart's daughter, Alexis, at an event that led to a major fundraiser helmed by Stewart and an entree into the upper echelon of event production.

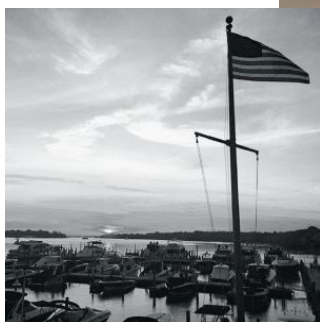
While Stair and Kowalenko's foray into catering might be considered a divine intervention, Christian Wölffer was determined from the outset to find a way to produce wine from Long Island's mostly untapped terrain. This year marks the 30th anniversary of when those game-changing vines were first planted. Thirty years later, Wölffer Estate's rosé has become synonymous with summer, thanks in large part to winemaker Roman Roth, who arrived at Wölffer in 1992 and has since been a leading force in not only Wölffer's evolution but that of the Long Island wine industry.

"There was a dream and ambition," says Roth. "Christian believed that we could build something special. There were obstacles to figure out, but we started with great soil and a great climate. We had to adapt to the environment. We also had to chip away at the prejudice from those



From top, scenes from soirees catered by Art of Eating: A Montauk event overlooking Fort Pond Bay; a sparkling send-off for a full-moon beach wedding; Long Island duck confit pizza with mushrooms from Open Minded Organics. Opposite page: Lobster rigatoni from The Beacon.

From top: Venetian Spritzer; view from the Beacon; roasted sea scallops, grilled artichokes and sweet pea aioli from Nick & Toni's.



who wanted big, oaky wines with French names. Christian was a vivacious man who loved to throw parties, and if people came to his parties they had to drink his wine! If you don't believe in your wine, who else will?"

Of course, a great wine is a lonely bedfellow without a great dish to accompany it. Wölffer Estate wines can be found on the lineup at The Beacon, which celebrates its 20th season. Nothing says summer like the annual opening of the Sag Harbor enclave, but it took some initial fine-tuning to tap into what has become a breezy, casual dining spot.

"We had to learn how to make The Beacon work," says owner David Loewenberg. "We envisioned a locally sourced, seafood-driven menu, but we quickly realized that service had to be simple, foregoing details like wine buckets for tabletop sleeves and outfitting staff in polo shirts instead of full uniforms to survive the sultry summer sun."

Catch-of-the-day seafood inspired The Beacon, but it is Italy's food-rich culture that was the driving force behind Nick & Toni's, which also marks its 30th anniversary. Like so many, Jeff Salaway and Toni Ross paid their dues by working in restaurants. The couple, who had met in Italy, decided that if they were going to work so many hours, why not do it for themselves?

The duo's first customer was retired *New York Times* food editor and critic Craig Claiborne, who had scouted out the venue before its opening had been announced, and helped the restaurant find its culinary voice. Ruth Reichl's glowing



review six years later solidified Nick & Toni's as a restaurant with staying power.

"We had a habit of jumping into the deep end and learning how to swim," recounts Ross, who remembers a much quieter East Hampton when the restaurant's doors first opened in 1988. "We set out to create an Italian restaurant that reflected the Italy that we knew—northern dishes not previously seen. Partly we were lucky, but we worked very hard."



Current and past employees at the 15-year anniversary party

From top: Wölffer Estate Vineyard wines; Christian Wölffer circa 1994; a smorgasbord of charcuterie pairs beautifully with one of Wölffer's rosés.



THE PROOF IS IN THE PUDDING

In many ways, Art of Eating's food philosophy has stayed the same while the demand for wow factor has amplified. Stair, who grew up on the North Fork, had always had a strong connection to local farmers and embraced seasonally inspired menus long before it was *de rigueur*. Though the volume has been turned up on props and decor over the years, the couple and their dedicated team still stop en route to an event to procure produce such as freshly picked strawberries or a bushel of corn still warm from the sun.

Nick & Toni's chef Joe Realmuto need only walk out the door to the restaurant's adjacent 1-acre garden to harvest for daily service. Great ingredients require a deft hand, which includes mastering cooking techniques like the searing heat from the restaurant's now famous wood-burning oven, which produces a signature whole-roasted fish served with garnishes that change with the seasons.

Tastemakers have often been as influential as an entree. One of The Beacon's most popular dishes, fish tacos with salsa verde, pepper jack cheese and tomato, was born out of a staff meal and has since become one of the restaurant's best-sellers. The bouillabaisse, too, has become a staple item and a thoughtful way to incorporate the sea's bounty while creatively managing the intimate kitchen's limited storage space—proving that mind over matter can result in the perfect bite.

A TASTE OF TOMORROW

While their landmark anniversaries offer a brief pause for retrospection, it's forward thinking that has kept The Beacon, Nick & Toni's, Wölffer Estate and Art of Eating ahead of the curve.

Wölffer's co-owner and creative director Joey Wölffer almost let an opportunity to reinvent the brand slip by after the unexpected death of her father. But after she partnered with her brother, Marc, the brand is experiencing a fresh and feisty renaissance that has resulted in a new and robust lineup of wines as well as hard ciders and "pink" gin that utilizes homegrown juniper berries.

"My dad was exactly who he was," says Joey of her father's razor-sharp vision. "Today there is a bohemian, pink floral spirit to Wölffer Estate. Some might say it's missing the classic feeling that it had. So what? This is us now. This is who we are. We're comfortable with what the brand is and it carries on. You have to know who you are and you have to stay relevant."

With this outlook the entrepreneurial sprint out East will, no doubt, continue to soar, defining not just an era, but an evolution of one of the world's most fecund nooks. ■