

FOOD & DRINK

The Making of a Top Wine Cellar

The American Hotel in Sag Harbor, N.Y., stocks vintage wines with old-fashioned prices



[ON WINE]

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It's not that I don't love to pay two or even three times retail for a bottle of wine that's nowhere near maturity, which is the situation in which I often find myself when I open a wine list, even in Manhattan. As a New Yorker, I'm used to being hustled. Yes, I know—my restaurant-owning friends have explained the economics to me, the expense of storage, the difficulty of finding mature Bordeaux or Barolo, blah, blah, blah. But I can't help dreaming about those old-school restaurant lists like "21" in New York, Bern's Steakhouse in Tampa, Fla., or La Tour d'Argent in Paris, which list hundreds of bottles of mature vintage wines, some of them with old-fashioned prices reflecting the fact that they were purchased on release. The American Hotel, in Sag Harbor, N.Y., has one of these drool-inducing lists. Owner Ted Conklin, 62, bought and restored the derelict hotel in the former whaling village in 1972, opening a restaurant and gradually accumulating one of the best cellars in the country.

Historical records have nothing to say about the selection of beverages at the tavern owned by James Howell, which stood on the site of the present hotel when British forces occupied Sag Harbor in 1777, although Madeira and rum were at that time the favorite tipples of the colonists. The commanding officer of the redcoats was captured there in a daring midnight raid by Lt. Col. Return Jonathan Meigs, a veteran of Bunker Hill, who crossed over from New Haven with 234 men in 13 whale-boats. Mr. Meigs and his men killed or captured most of the British garrison, seized tons of supplies—including 10 hog-head of rum—and made it back to New Haven without the loss of a single American soldier. Despite the success of Mr. Meigs's raid it took many years for Sag Harbor to recover from the devastation of the occupation.

Ultimately prosperity arrived as Sag Harbor became a major whaling port in the early part of the 19th century,

when the American Hotel was built on the site of Mr. Howell's tavern. Its watering holes then were notorious enough to earn a censorious mention in "Moby-Dick": "Arrived at last in old Sag Harbor, and seeing what the sailors did there...poor Queequeg gave it up for lost."

Sag Harbor's prosperity ended almost simultaneously with the discovery of gold in California. Whales were becoming scarce and coal oil was replacing whale oil; most of the whaling ships sailed for San Francisco carrying many of the town's able-bodied young men. When Ted Conklin bought the American Hotel, it was a derelict shell with a coal stove and four outhouses. The cellar, now the repository of thousands of great bottles, was knee-deep in coal ash, which Mr. Conklin, then 23, carried up the narrow stairs one bucket at a time.

Sag Harbor was a blue-collar town, a dowdy stepchild of the fashionable summer resort towns of Southampton and East Hampton, albeit one with a strong literary tradition stretching back to James Fenimore Cooper's sojourn. John Steinbeck, Nelson Algren and Spalding Gray lived here for many years; E.L. Doctorow, Wilfred Sheed and A.M. Homes all have homes in Sag Harbor. Mr. Conklin envisioned a place where plumbers and writers could mix, although there are probably more of the latter than the former these days, particularly in the summer, when Sag Harbor is invaded by well-heeled New Yorkers.

By the time he bought the hotel, Mr. Conklin had already opened and operated a successful restaurant in nearby Westhampton, rehabilitated a farm in upstate New York, gotten married and divorced. Although he'd been born in New York City and spent his early years in suburban Manhasset, N.Y., Mr. Conklin had deep roots in Sag Harbor. One of his forebears, Ananias Conklin, was among the first settlers to take possession of land that would later be incorporated as Sag Harbor after having been, according to Ted, "kicked out of Salem, Mass., by the same folks who sponsored the witch trials."

Ted Conklin—who recently married his college sweetheart after a chance reunion in Palm Beach—now lives in the house built by Ananias in 1700, and while the purchase of the American Hotel must have

seemed like a rash act at the time, he's clearly a man with a deep sense of history and tradition. He dresses as if he were still prepping at Lawrenceville—blue blazers, chinos and Top-Siders. He's an avid sailor and has a deep affection for all things nautical, most especially the 50-year-old, 75-foot Trumpy yacht which is docked at the marina just down the street from the hotel. His other great passion is for wine.

His palate seems to have kicked in early. "When I was in school my parents drank Almaden Mountain Chablis and I just knew it wasn't very good," he says. "When my mother discovered White Zinfandel I had to move out of the house." For those who know Mr. Conklin, this story is fairly believable; he has firm opinions in matters of taste and decorum and doesn't suffer fools, or sweet

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pink wines, gladly. He has impeccable manners but it's not hard to tell when he's annoyed or bored, even, sometimes, when the subject in question is wine. One sometimes gets the sense that his stolid WASP sensibility is slightly at odds with his epic epicureanism.

During his brief stint as a farmer after college, he worked his way through Julia Child's "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" and learned about wine with the help of such authors as Frank Schoonmaker and Frederick Wildman. "In those days," he says, "wine meant Bordeaux, and you could afford it. You could actually buy Château d'Yquem." (The current release sells for four figures.) When he opened the hotel Mr. Conklin was fortunate to have the guidance of a wine aficionado and distributor named Gus Gantz, who helped him stock the cellar of the hotel, after Mr. Conklin had excavated it, with Bordeaux, some of which is still resting comfortably there. He hired a French chef, and has gone

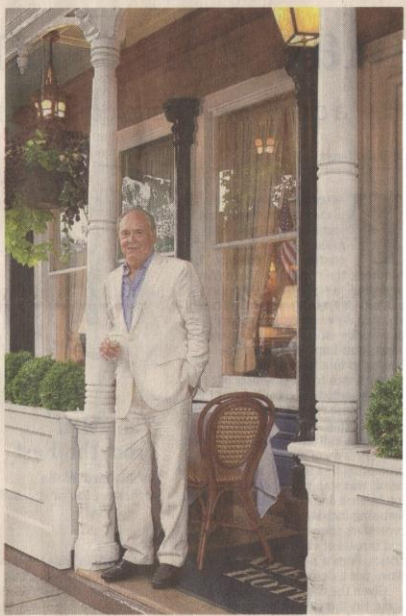
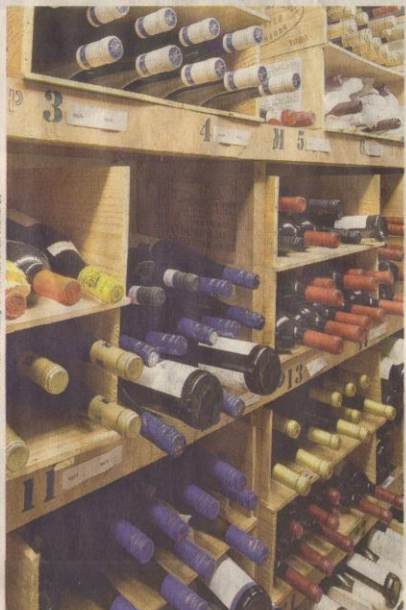
through many in the intervening years; the menu has always been fairly French, with a focus on local seafood.

Although he may have forgotten one or two of his chefs, he seems to remember every wine purchase, including the price. "One of my first purchases was the '66 Calon-Séguin," he tells me, referring to the venerable third-growth Bordeaux, as he leads me into the labyrinth of the cellar. "It was \$36 a case." The cellar, though very clean, looks utterly chaotic, with stacks of wooden cases and cardboard boxes creating narrow alleys and a wide variety of shelves and racks, but it's all accounted for on an Excel program that tells him and his staff the location of each bottle.

In the early days the list focused mainly on Bordeaux. Currently 114 pages, it still has an amazing selection of treasures from that region, from the '61 Gruaud-Larose (\$795) to the 2006 Lafite Rothschild (\$1,400). The list includes many wines that are priced well below what they'd fetch at auction, although Mr. Conklin believes that the great growths of Bordeaux are becoming too expensive. As much as he loves these wines, he seems offended by the idea of anyone spending four figures for a bottle. "The first-growth Bordeaux are becoming commodities," he says. "Once they become commodities they don't have a place at the table." But he can't quite seem to break the Bordeaux habit—I notice many cases of expensive '05s and '06s—including Petrus and Lafite—among the stacked cases.

The cellar would be extraordinary if only for its collection of older vintages, including an extensive list of Burgundies, but it also reflects the new reality of the global wine village. Mr. Conklin keeps up, and he is currently very enthusiastic about New Zealand whites, Sonoma Pinot Noir and Argentinian Malbecs. He's also been a long time booster of the top Long Island wines. Sitting on the front porch of the hotel, in between greeting the passersby on the sidewalk, he tells me, "There's never been more good wine in the world than there is today." And Mr. Conklin is still discovering it and buying it, somehow finding more space in the cellar.

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A view, top left, of former Sag Harbor Cove; top right, the wine cellar of the town's American Hotel; above, owner Ted Conklin on the porch of the hotel.

