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Deirdre Heekin  
and Caleb Barber  
at their farm and  
winery in  
Woodstock, Vt.

## A VINEYARD GROWS IN VERMONT

DEIRDRE HEEKIN GROWS NORTH AMERICAN  
HYBRIDS IN AN UNLIKELY *TERROIR*

BY MICHAEL TULIPAN



PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
OLIVER PARINI

**S**ixteen-hundred feet up, in the lush Vermont countryside, stands an improbable vineyard.

The land slopes gently downward from a sleepy country lane, a stately cluster of trees to the east, expansive views of rolling hills to the





The vineyard at Heekin and Barber's farm is the main source of grapes for Heekin's wine label, La Garagista. The couple also leases land in Vergennes and West Addison, Vt.

north. In summer, wildflowers bloom and insects swarm. A drove of pigs burrows into the earth, tilling it in the most natural of ways.

Winemaker Deirdre Heekin and her husband, Caleb Barber, purchased this 8-acre piece of paradise 17 years ago, slowly returning it to agricultural use after years of neglect. They began with a series of large garden plots, then transitioned to grapevines, eventually producing enough grapes to launch Heekin's wine label, La Garagista.

"La Garagista started as an educational experiment for myself in my work as a sommelier. I never expected that it would become a full-time passion," says Heekin, reflecting on her evolution from artist to restaurateur and from sommelier to winemaker.

To call her leap to winemaking unexpected would be no exaggeration. But despite her early training as a filmmaker and dancer, a career in restaurants was perhaps inevitable for Heekin. "We ate out all the time, almost every night of the week," she says of her childhood in southern Indiana. "My parents loved dining out, and we ate in all kinds of places, everything from honky-tonk taverns to fancy restaurants.

"As a small child, my favorite game was to play 'restaurant,' and I was constantly asking my family and family friends what they'd like to eat."

Not surprisingly, time spent in Italy deepened Heekin's interest in food—and wine. She and Barber met in 1987 during an improvisational dance workshop at Middlebury College, and four years later, the couple found themselves in Italy establishing a dance company. At night, they worked at a friend's piano bar, and Barber, then an amateur cook, began replicating restaurant dishes at home. The discovery that many restaurants in Italy cultivated their

own gardens and grapevines continued to inspire them long after they departed in 1992.

Back home, Barber continued down the path of restaurant life while keeping one foot in the dance world. Heekin's intellectually curious nature led her to pursue a flurry of interests in publishing, dance and restaurants, even attaining an MFA in creative writing.

After a return trip to Italy in 1995 while Barber apprenticed with a baker outside Florence, the couple opened a bakery and café in Woodstock, Vt., a historic and picturesque New England town. They had no experience running a bakery or café, but they found success. By 2002, the space had become Osteria Pane e Salute, where chef Barber turned out thin-crust pizzas, pasta Bolognese and other hearty dishes, and salads using produce from Heekin's and his farm.

The tiny, rustic room with only six tables and a small bar could easily have been their home, overflowing with flowers, the exuberant Heekin introducing Vermonters to small Italian producers such as La Stoppa, Foradori and de Conciliis.

Yet this proved but a stepping stone to Heekin's greater destiny: operating a full-fledged winery.

True to its name, La Garagista began in a garage located behind Heekin and Barber's house. "The name is a nod to the spirit of the idea that it isn't necessary to have Grand Cru sites and a château to make lovely, quaffable wines," Heekin explains, alluding to Bordeaux's *garagiste* movement of the 1990s.

Even in the beginning, when Heekin and Barber focused only on the restaurant and the gardens to supply it, she felt the need to better understand the winemaking process. "When I started the winemaking 'project,' it was only for education," she says. "I had



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no idea it would grow into this. I wanted to experience initial fermentation and malolactic fermentation.”

She first purchased juice from Italy and California but lost much of the resulting wine to vinegar bacteria from fruit flies. She tried again the following year, purchasing Sangiovese and Barbera grapes from California, with the experiment yielding better results.

A year later, she and Barber stopped at Lincoln Peak Vineyard in New Haven, Vt., on the way home from a family trip. Heekin appreciated the balance of the Lincoln Peak wines, which were made from hybrid grape varieties such as Marquette, Frontenac, St. Croix and La Crescent.

These grapes represent crosses of various species native to North America (*Vitis riparia*, *Vitis labrusca* and others); sometimes they are also crossed with the classic European winemaking species *Vitis vinifera*. Unlike finicky *vinifera*, North America’s native grape species and their hybrids are cold-hardy, disease-resistant and well-suited to the difficult soils of a place like Vermont. But some wine drinkers dismiss them for their often foxy, musky character.

Heekin had heard about the unreliable quality of Vermont grapes, but she was impressed by the absence of foxy notes in the Lincoln Peak wines. On impulse, she and Barber loaded 100 vines into the back of their truck.

It was July 2008, their field sat untilled and grapegrowing was still a mystery to them. But somehow, a vineyard was born.



As part of her biodynamic growing regimen, Heekin uses a spray made from horsetail, a native plant that regulates fungal disease, acts as a drying agent and magnifies sunlight.

Heekin is the first to admit that the evolution of La Garagista happened without a plan—but she has never been one for much premeditation. As with her other professional endeavors, her growth as a winemaker developed organically. She writes in frank fashion of the first year’s challenges in her recent book, *An Unlikely Vineyard: The Education of a Farmer and Her Quest for Terroir*.

“In a perfect world, we would have waited to plant the vines,” she says, cataloging the basics of vineyard management: proper tilling, soil testing, planting in late May or early June after the frost. None of this happened. As she writes, “We planted at the wrong time, in improperly prepared soil, full of visions of harvesting our own wine.”

This impetuosity can be chalked up to Heekin’s tendency to jump into things with both feet. “I am not a particularly patient person,” she says. “I have had to learn patience as an adult. I like for things to happen, and happen sooner rather than later.” Like the couple’s gardens, the home vineyard was cultivated on organic principles from day one, and the fast-growing nature of the operation led to much trial and error. In fall 2008, soil testing revealed the vineyard to be woefully deficient in some key nutrients. Its high acid levels were binding up many of the beneficial soil materials, and the land lacked magnesium, phosphorus and nitrogen. Luckily, the vines were young and not producing fruit that first year, giving the soil time to balance out.

Approaching winemaking from a farmer’s perspective, Heekin spent the winter researching how to be in tune with her land and decided that biodynamic farming held the key. In much of the winemaking world, such an approach might not be impractical, but in the wilds of Vermont, with its varying weather patterns and harsh winters, this choice seemed particularly risky. The next year proved to be a time of waiting, planting more vines, applying for a commercial license and writing a book.

In 2010, with another 350 vines in the ground, Heekin applied for a Vermont business development grant for women farmers and used the funds to travel to Burgundy. There she studied with Bruno Weil, an Austrian winemaker well-known for his adherence to biodynamics, at L’Ecole du Vin et des Terroirs in Puligny-Montrachet. Traipsing through vineyards to look at, even taste, the soil, she examined and questioned everything. It was the first formal education in winemaking she had received.

“She considers herself not an expert, but rather an expert student,” Barber says of his wife. “The biggest challenge isn’t knowing what to do; it’s knowing when to do it. The craft is in fine-tuning one’s attention and perception to the needs of the vines or the wine in the cantina.” This comes naturally to the observant and curious Heekin.

Once back from France, Heekin and Barber began to catalog the herbs and flowers that grew among their vines, which over two years displayed a shift away from their previously high acidity. Nitrogen-rich clover would sprout and be tilled back into the ground. Plantain, sometimes considered a weed, protected the vines from erosion and attracted pest-eating birds. Lamb’s-quarters appeared, bringing



with it a vitamin- and mineral-rich mixture to be plowed back into the earth. 2010 proved a pivotal year: “I had found my vocation,” Heekin says.

Her repertoire of grape varieties has shifted over the years but is still dominated by Marquette and La Crescent—hybrids of *Vitis vinifera* and *Vitis riparia* that are relatives of Pinot Noir and Black Muscat, respectively. She has also experimented with classic vinifera, including Riesling, Blaufränkisch and Melon de Bourgogne, though those vines don’t yet yield a substantial crop.

With the wines catching on, Heekin has had to make some adjustments. An early effort, the 2012 Vinu Jancu—an “orange wine” (a white wine made with extended skin contact) of La Crescent from a vineyard in West Addison—helped put Heekin on the map. The vineyard did not yield enough fruit in 2013 to make the wine, but in 2014, yields were “right where they should be,” Heekin says.

At the same time, opportunity knocked. She and Barber had been sourcing grapes from two vineyards near Vermont’s Lake Champlain—one in Vergennes and the other in West Addison. When these became available to lease, Heekin and Barber took them over and converted both sites to biodynamic farming.

The wines have evolved as well. The current lineup of still wines comprises Harlots and Ruffians, a white field blend of La Crescent and Frontenac Gris from the Vergennes vineyard; Damejeanne, a red cuvée made of Marquette and La Crescent, also from Vergennes; and Loups-Garoux, a varietal of Frontenac Noir from West Addison. Two wines from Heekin’s home vineyard will also arrive this year: the 2013 Merula Alba, made from La Crescent, and the 2013 Merula Coracina, a red field blend of Marquette, Frontenac Noir, Frontenac Blanc, Frontenac Gris and St. Croix.

Perhaps her most unlikely successes are a pair of  *pétillants naturels*, sparkling wines made by an ancestral method in which the primary fermentation is interrupted by bottling the wine midferment, thereby trapping carbon dioxide in the bottle. Ci Confonde Petillant Naturel Rosé and Ci Confonde Petillant Naturel White, both from the Vergennes vineyard, are bottled two to five weeks after harvest.

Business growth has proven steady, with 2014 Heekin’s largest vintage yet at around 500 cases. Despite the tiny output, La Garagista wines have found advocates in sommeliers such as Pascaline Lepeltier of Rouge Tomato, in New York, and Colleen Hein of Eastern Standard Kitchen & Drinks, in Boston.

“Deirdre’s wines are entirely unto themselves in style,” Hein says. “Each cuvée she crafts is packed with personality, combining freshness of fruit and a distinctive note of *sauvage* indicative of the winemaking style, the varietals and the vineyards in which they are grown. As a sommelier, it is incredibly exciting to be able to introduce wines that are not only local but also expertly made to our guests.”



Barber, Heekin and friends, including neighbors from Stitchdown Farm and Fable Farm, enjoy a summer solstice lunch with ciders from Fable Farm Fermentory.

A true winery building has now risen next to the vines, soon to replace the old barn as the base of operations. That barn was itself an upgrade over the original garage, which was dismantled and used to create plant beds and the long utility tables scattered about the property. Heekin’s winemaking continues to evolve even as these echoes of the past surround her, reminding her of La Garagista’s launch just a few short years ago.

“We are already about five years ahead of where we thought we’d be,” she says when asked about plans for the future. Next up, distribution to California, Arizona and Montreal, as well as other areas of the Northeast. “We still have room to continue to plant in all three vineyards. In three to five years, I can imagine doubling our production, hitting about 1,000 cases.”

If Heekin’s history is any gauge, the projections will likely prove conservative—the only conservative thing about her.

*Michael Tulipan is a freelance writer and editor of TheSavvyExplorer.com.*