

## THE GRAPES OF ROTH

by Ken Lifshitz 1970

At the toe of lake Seneca, visible for several blocks if you are approaching along main street a monument to the culinary arts stands erect and intact. It is a thirty by forty some odd foot replica of a chocolate cake, bearing the inscription "Captain Jack's Boat ride". If one should approve it to approach closer and stand beneath it's roaring hulk, amidcake so to speak, one might be tempted to leave Watkins Glen immediately to search out the culinary wonders of the vast continent which gave fruit to this wonder. And so we did, the three of us, on this fine autumn day, striking northward along the long grey tongue of highway that licks the western shore of the lake.

About fifteen miles from where 'the Morton', strikes deep into the earth, (may God preserve us,) for it's briny booty, we sought our destination,- the "Four Chimney" organic farm.

As we drove through the pregnant tumult of Autumn, (I think myself still much like these yellow leaves, dancing at every breath's behest once fallen, like old work men, now whose sole chore is to run hither and thither in petty attempts to escape the oncoming ravaging winter) turning on to Hall Road, our excitement precludes the possibility, of deducing, and once deducing, observing the four chimneys themselves, but rather like, students whose long hours in the classroom often cause them to take the name for the thing and the thing for the name, were not persuaded that we had arrived until we saw a neatly lettered but aging sign proclaiming the fact. If we had been keen enough to the thing, we would have seen not four, but six whitewashed chimneys if you count the two that flanked the driveway on either side.

Dis-gorged from the Toyota, and greatly relieved that we stood outside the small cab's confines, we looked at each other wondering well, what next. Pat took the initiative and started off towards the house, while almost simultaneously the screen door opened and out stepped a bearded young man perhaps in his late thirties, who approached us with a measured step.

"Are you Mr. --" Pat-began.

"That's right, Pedersen, P E-D-E-R-sen," he spooned,out. the letters like Pabulum to squalling babes.

"Here for the grapes?" he said, "We had a killer frost last night so they're up in the barn."

"Oh, did you get them all picked?"I questioned lamely.

"Most of 'em, except for two rows."

Mr. Pedersen, had a slight flush of red crowning his brown beard, which may have been the effect of razor burn, that, or pressed from him like juice by the fresh country air.

He wore, loosely, a grey and plaid flannel shirt, and stood well poised with kindly eyes, that bore down upon us like two suns blazing from- on high.

As we begin transferring the grapes from the barn to the truck, he begins pointing out the different types of rot to which the grapes play host.

"This is grey rot,"he says pointing to a withered and leprous looking cluster.

"That actually, is desirable, it makes the juice sweeter and the wineries will often pay extra for it.'  
"See this, no this here? That's green rot."

I spy a green ruffed pitting on the bunch he now holds.

Like.-good guests and bad, I think, one leaving you with less substance but of a sweeter and more worthy nature, the other a mere parasite upon your goods.

Mr. Pedersen sensing that despite his farmer's practicality that the subject is somewhat meat for humour, (though rotting meat), makes a deprecating remark and we all depart for the other side of the barn where the Concords are stored.

As Mr. Pedersen stands some 60 feet away, framed picturesquely in the upper entrance to the barn, we decide to begin the conversation in more full exercise, having waited for the inconvenience, like good soldiers seeking the difficult circumstance to strengthen their sinews. Thus we set to forge our vocal chords on the rock of distance. "The farmers on the other side of the lake told us it was impossible to raise grapes organically here." Pat, called out.

"Well, not quite impossible," he said,

"We just have to do everything much like they did a hundred years ago. We have to tie the vines higher from the ground. It's difficult,-you have to clear out the underbrush, you know the scrub, push it into these big piles by hand and then burn it. You have to watch it burn sometimes all night till it goes out, 'cuz you know. And then again, we have to bring in thousands and thousands of ladybugs" he said even marveling somewhat himself at the statement."Just bushel baskets full.

I tried to imagine myself walking up the street.

"Ah, Mrs. Smith would you like a bushel of ladybugs-

Ahh, Miss Jones, would you care for a few thousand bugs.

Naturally Dot asked, "Do you grow them here?"

"No, we buy them " he said well distinguished.

When we had finished, loading the Concords on the truck, he stopped for a chat, being in a somewhat more talkative, mood as the work of loading the grapes in the back of the Toyota had been accomplished.

"You know there's one fellow down there who lost his whole field this year." Warming to his topic he continued,--

"You know the Morton salt company. Well, they take their slag, I guess that's what you call it, anyway, the stuff from the salt that they can't use and they pump it back into the ground.

But it doesn't stay there,-- salt springs started comin' up,-ruined all his vineyards.

"What a shame" Pat said. "Well how much do we owe you,--?" she continued.

"Let's see, ten bushels, hmmm, let's say around sixty dollars.-- You know I brought a'truckload of those Delawares up to the press up in PennYann. Now those folks are laconic, to say the least, and they even said they were some of the best they had ever tasted.

"How do you plan to make the juice?" he queried.

"Well we use a steamer," Pat said.

"Oh, one of those Mehu-Maia?"

"Right."

"Well I don't care for them too much," he said.

"It raises the juice to too high a temperature and caramelizes the sugar. That's why you get that caramel taste. I generally just heat my juice to about 142 degrees just to pasteurize it. Say do you want to taste a glass?"

"Sure!" we said, starting back down to the house.

He emerged from the house bearing three cups with a purplish amber liquid-in them.

We,- all drank them down amidst exclamations of awe and wonderment.

"My neighbor up here," he went on seemingly unmindful of our chortles of delight,

"raises mostly Catawbas, you know Catawbas, well, a couple of years ago he put in some Chardonnay, ripped it

out this year. Too, delicate. As far as pesticides, they all use them around here. I'm the only organic grape farmer east of the Rockies." He added with a hint of pride. A lot of people have been using a chemical that makes the birds lose their voice for a half hour. Scares the heck out of them. But they have a now thing now, that's called "Av-alarm", it gives of the cry, that's like a bird in distress. Works pretty well. I don't use it though, used to use guns but the neighbors complained, so now I use nets."

He squinted up towards us cocking his head sideways to see if we had absorbed all this information.

"One year I didn't use the nets on the Delawares and I lost all but two bushels out of six rows."

At this, Dottie, asked him for directions to the press in PennYann which he willingly gave, and we bid farewell to Mr. Pedersen and his six chimneys and pressed onwards to PennYann.

You may well wonder why this article is entitled the Grapes of Roth, and who Roth exactly is. Well, the story goes, in this part of the country, that fake grapes were actually invented by a Roman named Romulus Roth, to grace the tables of the Roman consuls when they were not home or having gone to their aunt's did not want their tables to appear empty even for a moment. These first fruit of Roth's imagination were made entirely out of wax, he having been attempting actually to make wax apples and failing miserably--,. Thus, as a sort of 'nom de guerre' or whatever the correct terminology is, amongst grape growers produce is generally called the fruit of waxing Roth.