

BEHIND THE BOTTLE

MEDOLLA VINEYARDS 2003 MERLOT, \$17

A red wine that was a long time coming.

BY AMY ZAVATTO

For all intents and purposes, John Medolla is new to the wine biz and on paper might seem like a most unlikely architect of a new and very good merlot. After 30 years in the aviation industry, he and his wife, Denise, took the plunge in 2002—problem was, they had no vines, no winemaking equipment, no facility in which to make the magic happen. But with the memory of his Neapolitan grandmother burning in his brain, he didn't let the little things get in the way.

"I guess you could say that my wife and I wanted to continue [my] family's tradition," John says. "It was sort of a calling."

So, he found a way to make it happen, buying grapes from McCullough Vineyards in Aquebogue and working in conjunction with Lenz Winery.

"We are one of the smallest wineries on the North Fork, [and] it is common for smaller wineries to utilize a larger winery's facility. We began making wine with the 2002 vintage, a 100 percent merlot. We operate out of the Lenz Winery. We are known as an 'alternating proprietor,' which in layman terms means we have an arrangement with Lenz to utilize their equipment when not in use by them. It works for us. It gives us flexibility."

Right now, Medolla is an all-merlot, all-the-time producer, a decision that has allowed John to simultaneously relearn what was taught to him by his own Italian-immigrant family, and work side by side with talented Lenz winemaker Eric Frye. "Frye is the greatest!" said Medolla. "I am now working with him hand in hand in creating our wines. His attention to detail is incredible. He is a great teacher. He believes in what he does; we believe in him."

Medolla also believes in remaking history. When his grandmother immigrated to 41 President Street in Red Hook, Brooklyn, in 1913, she became a bit of a neighborhood icon in the pursuit of crafting vino.

"Upon my grandmother's arrival in 1913, she settled in Brook-



lyn and opened a café. At that time, the Brooklyn docks were booming and many of the locals came from Southern Italy and took great pride in continuing the tradition of making wine. During harvest my grandmother helped the locals in making their own wines. She provided the equipment and so forth, so that each family could produce their own wine. Each family had their own method and at times that caused a lot of arguing!" Medolla laughs. "As a child I can recall the old-timers squabbling over their individual methods, [but] the end result was everyone made wine. You could say [my grandmother] was sort of a neighborhood icon during the '20s, '30s and '40s."

So now John and Denise have released their second vintage: 500 cases of the 2003 Medolla Mer-

lot, which "was a cool year, temperature-wise," Medolla says. "We could have had a little less rain as well. Hence we have more of a delicate, elegant wine. Our 2003 Merlot was a special wine for us. We waited about three years after bottling before releasing it. The evolution of this wine was amazing. It was constantly changing for the better."

If his grandmother were alive to sip it herself, it's easy to imagine that she'd be pleased with what her grandson has done. It is full of ripe, almost jammy, strawberry aromas, along with interesting notes of tea and cedar. The tannins have eased, and it is well-balanced with a lovely, lingering finish that cries out for warm, wintery braises, like short ribs. Medolla's pairing, though, has more to do with the company:

"Any food that is cooked slowly with a lot of passion and enjoyed with good friends and family! As we evolve, we want to continue to create wines by hand, 'mano a mano,' and share our family's heritage with as many people as we can. We like doing that. It's what we are all about." 