

# A Sweet Match Of Grapes And Love

By Deborah Scoblionkov, Special to The Inquirer

POSTED: October 04, 1987

A vineyard grows in Northern Liberties. And each year, a couple of urban pioneers, Sally McCabe and Stanley Pokras, harvest the grapes to make home-grown Philadelphia wine. Their wine, which they affectionately call Chateau Baqueyard, is available exclusively to their friends, many of whom pitch in each year to pick the bountiful crop and crush the concord grapes of the single vine that is their vineyard.

But what a grapevine it is! Pokras estimates that it is older than his 42 years. Ten years ago, when Pokras, a veteran of early South Street and one of the pioneers of Northern Liberties, moved into his rowhouse in the 400 block of Poplar Street, the vine completely covered his house, as well as two neighboring homes, and threatened to engulf a fourth building around the corner.

That first year, Pokras, a computer consultant, and a friend were sitting around, marveling at the monster vine, when they decided to make jams and jellies from the bumper crop. Soon afterward, the friend sent him a book on home winemaking and inspired him to ferment the next year's harvest.

At the same time, unbeknown to Pokras, McCabe was living on a 98-acre farm in Kimberton (near her home town of Phoenixville) and was learning to make wines from fruits and berries from a colleague at Penn State's agricultural extension service.

McCabe says of her mentor: "She was making wine from potatoes and beets. I swear she could make wine from dirty socks! I stick to fruits," McCabe adds, very emphatically.

McCabe has experimented with an unusual variety of fruits, including oranges ("It gets very bubbly"), grapefruit ("Ghastly, very bitter") and cantaloupe ("Disgusting! It started growing slime").

When McCabe and Pokras met six years ago at a friend's wedding, they quickly realized that if only they combined their talents, they could make beautiful wine

together. "Ours was a marriage of art and science," McCabe, now 32, relates. Pokras agrees: "There was a real relationship there. She was actually making much better quality wine than I. She had a better understanding of it all."

Two years ago, they married and christened their wine Chateau Baqueyard. The rowhouse winery is most successful with raspberry and peach wines. Occasionally, the couple are inspired by whim or availability to create a special vintage. Last year, they came up with a 1986 "Camping Trip," made

from a blend of raspberries, red and white currants and blueberries, and fortified with vodka. McCabe's recipe is very simple: a half-gallon of fruit, sugar to taste, yeast and water. Usually the couple use a "champagne yeast" for their wines, but will resort to plain bread yeast if necessary.

McCabe usually is the innovator, but it was Pokras who chanced upon the secret to the Dom Perignon of Chateau Baqueyard - Stanley's Sweet Buble. Like many great discoveries, it happened by accident. "I stuck my finger into the fermenting wine," he recalls, "and I thought, 'Damn, this is interesting!' " So he investigated further and discovered that unfinished wine throws off carbon-dioxide bubbles that give it a natural sparkle similar to champagne. "I called Sally up to tell her about it, and I just started giggling. It turns your ears pink and makes you laugh."

Once she tasted the homemade champagne, McCabe was as excited as Pokras. She ran out to buy wire cages to hold the corks in place and entered three bottles of Stanley's Sweet Buble in the annual Harvest Show sponsored by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. It took second place in 1985.

Each year, the couple try to re-create that original experience and bottle a batch of unfinished wine for themselves. "That's the fun part. It's all bubbly like grape soda, so sweet, but with a real kick to it. Pretty soon, we're giggling. Course, I'm a cheap drunk," says McCabe. "One glass and I'm silly." This year, an obviously pregnant McCabe has not drunk a drop. However, in honor of a guest, Stanley takes the occasion to open a bottle of 1986 Sweet Buble.

"Hold it out the window, Stanley," says McCabe, who has known bottles of homemade sparkling wines to explode in her hands.

Elaborate precautions are taken and Pokras treats the bottle as if he's holding a live grenade.

It opens with a whimper, not a bang.

"It's a dud."

"Maybe we could add some club soda, Stanley."

Each spring, McCabe and Pokras tend to their vine, weeding it and feeding it compost, even though it originates on a neighbor's rental property. Each year, it shrinks a little more.

Vintage 1987 at Chateau Baqueyard was sparse, the couple say, and a late harvest, but overall quality was good. "Very sweet," says McCabe. What crop there was had been picked over by the starlings and robins that nibbled on the ripe grape bunches. So, on the afternoon of Sept. 7, when the harvest officially began and ended, the "migrant workers," about two dozen friends of McCabe and Pokras, mounted ladders and wobbly chairs and made quick work of harvesting the grapes.

After two dozen shopping bags of grapes were collected, the second phase, cluster-busting - separating the pips and stems from the ripe grapes - began. The grapes were tossed into a double-plastic lined garbage pail to be crushed by hand - and by foot ("Only if they insist," says McCabe with a sigh.)

One intrepid foot-stomping volunteer was Jessica Mikuliak, a precocious 13-year-old who declared it a "wonderful cultural experience," although she detests the taste of wine. "I like the feeling when it squishes through my toes. It's like when I do dishes and squeeze the mashed potatoes through my fingers."