

# The Grape Nut

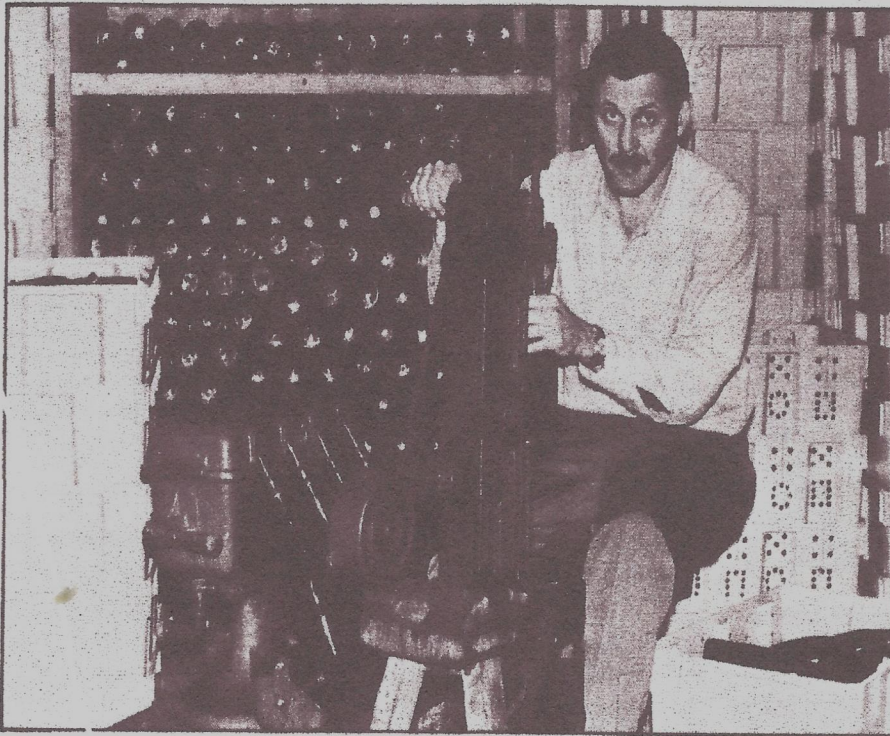
BY BARBARA ANN ROSENBERG

"That nut from Birchrunville" — that's what they used to call Mel Gordon out in Chester County. For years they talked about him that way. No question about it, they were positive he was a bit soft in the head.

He asked for it, too, in a way, moving into that conservative area, buying that lovely piece of property complete with grist mill and pre-Revolutionary house, and instead of settling down quietly like the rest of his neighbors,

tearing up the terrain to plant grapes. Not just any old grapes, either. French grapes—to make wine! Anybody in his right mind would know he couldn't grow French grapes in Birchrunville on a rocky hillside, so rocky he had to use a pick and shovel to set out the vines. What sane man would go to so much trouble for a few measly grapes that probably wouldn't live anyway? Besides, what kind of nonsense was it for some gray flannel executive type to put in 14 hours a day working in the field. The whole thing was just so goddamn ridiculous.

Not that Mel Gordon really paid much attention to what those Chester County folks were thinking. He had his mind all made up about what he wanted to do . . . and pretty much how he wanted to go about it, too. He came up with the idea in France while he was living in Dijon, enjoying a year away from his insurance business, relaxing and soaking up culture and



*Conestoga Vineyard's Mel Gordon mans his own bottling department.*

food. And wine . . . lots of wine. After all, it was right there under his nose. He couldn't very well ignore it. His rented château was only spitting distance from the Route des Grands Crus, home of all the great Burgundies, and with all that good vintage stuff around, well, a fellow had an obligation. So he started tasting—and the more he tasted, the more he liked it. As a matter of fact, he loved it!

Not that he was any kind of wine expert. Back home he hardly touched the stuff. But the more he drank that Burgundy, the more involved he got. How come these wines tasted so good? And what gave them all their individual characteristics, even if the vineyards that produced the grapes were right next door to one another? What made the difference? He just had to know. So he asked a million questions, talked to all the winegrowers, the celebrated *vignerons* of the area, to get their explanation. He wanted to find out everything: what

kind of grapes they used, what was the process, barrels or casks, how long to ferment? How about problems . . . soil . . . climate? You name it, he wanted to know about it. Along with the questioning, he kept drinking. Sort of an immersion course.

After a year of that, he was really hooked. But unfortunately, by then, it was time to leave and he knew he just had to develop a new source of supply. Not that he couldn't buy plenty of wine in the States,

it was just the luxury of having it all growing in such close proximity that turned him on. Anyway, he figured he now knew something about the business. Why not give it a go back home in Pennsylvania? So he packed up the family and came home to look for a place to get started. And when he found that spread in Birchrunville, just west of Phoenixville, he knew it was made to order. What a spot for a winery!

Everything about it was ideal. The hill was steep enough so the grapes were angled to catch every ray of sunlight. And the ground was rocky enough so the vines would have to struggle to survive. And, Gordon claims, that's one of the factors that produces great wine—the struggle. If the vines have it too easy, they may turn out grapes that make pleasant drinkable wine, but nothing outstanding. Sort of like people, Gordon thinks, with typical over-30 Protestant Ethic reasoning. Where they have to

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work hard, they turn out better. And he wanted nothing but the best, even if it meant breaking his back with a pick and shovel to get those vines into the ground.

So there he was, owner of a nifty piece of property, all set to do all the things he'd learned from his buddies back in Burgundy. Unfortunately, when he went to Harrisburg to announce his intention of starting a winery and get their blessings, he ran into the kind of response he might get if he were trying to open a whorehouse. It took one helluva lot of persuasion to convince the Commonwealth that winemaking wasn't necessarily synonymous with sin and sodomy. It just so happens, though, that persuasiveness is one of Gordon's long suits. When he wasn't making wine, he was making money selling insurance. He'd done his homework, too, before he went to Harrisburg, and went armed with information on how the founding fathers had set a good precedent.

Like Thomas Jefferson, for instance. He liked to think about wines as the "beverage of moderation" and in order to provide himself with some, he tried importing European wines. Even that august Quaker William Penn was in the act with some experimental plantings of French and Spanish varieties. Unfortunately, none of their experiments worked out. Fortunately for Mel Gordon, though, they had set the stage, even provided a certain air of respectability to the whole business.

Gordon eventually convinced the Commonwealth powers-that-be that winemaking might even be good for Pennsylvania. So the Conestoga Vineyard was born, the first in the Commonwealth since Prohibition. It wasn't an easy delivery.

First, there were those vines, those damn French vines he wanted so badly. Everybody warned Gordon not to mess with them. Even the head of Penn State's Department of Pomology (that's fruit growing to you) told him if he wanted to make wine, he'd better stick to Concord grapes—anything else wouldn't last in this climate three years, he said. But Concords and their sweet wine just weren't Gordon's *shtick*. He wanted French grapes and French-type wine and he was going to get them to grow right there in Birchrunville, too.

So they planted the vines, 150 of them imported from France, crammed in tight on six acres of rocky hillside—and it sure was one helluva lot of work, digging through all that rock with a pick and shovel. Gordon and

his wife did it together, though, side by side, with recollections of their happy times in Burgundy and visions of reproducing them—and the wine they both loved—in Chester County. Unfortunately, it didn't work out quite that way, at least as far as the happy times were concerned—and some of the vines didn't produce such hot wine either. The Gordons eventually split and she lives in the house and he tends the vineyard only a few feet away. However, out of deference to Gordon's ex-wife's earlier involvement, her name still appears, along with his, on all but the most recent Conestoga labels.

Planting the vines and getting them to grow was only a small part of it, though. It seems that everybody had been willing enough to share information on growing and squeezing the grapes, but nobody had bothered to let Gordon in on the fact that before he really got into the business, he needed a few other skills, too. Skills that had nothing to do with winemaking *per se*. Artisan skills like carpentry to convert the mill into a winery. And draftsmanship to draw the scale plan the U.S. Government requires of every winery.

And coopering. Without knowing about barrel construction, Gordon couldn't possibly stay in business, at least if he was going to persist, romantic soul that he is, in making French-type wine in imported French barrels. Even with all his coopering, though, these barrels still give him trouble, they're wildly temperamental and Gordon's Law of Barrels goes something like this: "They leak in the most inconvenient places at the most inconvenient times—and with your best wine."

Even coming up with a name for the vineyard turned out to be a hassle. All his buddies got in the act with suggestions. They used to sit around in Wally Callahan's kitchen at the Coventry Forge Inn, a local mecca for the food and wine freaks in the area, and toss out possibilities. By consensus, they agreed the name ought to have something to do with Chester County, to jazz up its image a bit, to make it known for something other than scenery, horses and Andrew Wyeth. "Brandywine" presented obvious identity problems—wine or brandy, which? That would never do. The name "Chester" itself didn't have that certain pizzazz. No ring. No class. When one joker came up with "Côte de Pottstown," though, Gordon blanched, said to hell with it, retreated into Indian lore and settled on Conestoga, for the Indian tribe of

the same name. Simple, straightforward, American, that's what Gordon wanted. French grapes, maybe, but to turn out a product identified with America. Unique.

So unique, as a matter of fact, that he wasn't even interested in any of the fancy traditional names for his wines. Red, white and rosé said it all. That's what Conestoga makes. Red, white, and rose. Red is the most popular and, Gordon thinks, the best of his wines.

All in all, Gordon has played around with about 50 grape varieties over the years to get the blends that suit him. It's not easy, either. It takes about three years from the time a vine is planted to get enough of a crop to produce anything, and another couple of years before it's drinkable. So it takes five or six years to determine if a particular variety is worth cultivating. Even now in a given year, Gordon may vary the mix. Not like a newlywed bride, fooling around with the recipe; it's just that he's always trying to improve the product—to turn out the best wine he can, given the bunch of handicaps he operates under.

Not the locale. He considers that a plus. He even claims that Pennsylvania, particularly Southeastern Pennsylvania, may turn out to be one of the finest grape growing regions in the world. The really outstanding pressings, the noble wines, in general, come from the most northern climates where their tender vines are barely able to survive—and Pennsylvania fills that bill.

Even the swings of weather generally seem to work in Pennsylvania's favor. The Burgundy area of France has awful years and magnificent years. In California where the weather is constant, there are no bad years, but no great ones either. Pennsylvania has the weather to produce great years.

Harrisburg isn't even a roadblock anymore. It's done a complete about-face since the days when Gordon was pleading to make Conestoga a reality. It now sponsors research stations around the state, along with the U.S. Department of Agriculture—hundreds of Pennsylvania acres devoted solely to the study of wine grapes. What a switch: ten years ago all they were interested in was grape juice.

Still, one of Gordon's major problems seems to be that up to now there's been almost no written documentation of the winegrowers' art. The French had about 2,000 years head start in amassing their know-how, but they didn't put much of it down on paper. So while Gordon read everything he could lay his hands on, along

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with asking a million questions, he finally came to the conclusion that nobody really fully understands why certain things happen anyway. "It's like making love" he says. "Until you've done it, you don't know what the hell it's all about . . . with all due respect to Masters and Johnson."

As a matter of fact, he points out all you have to do to make wine is gather grapes and bruise them—nature takes care of the rest . . . up to a point, and it's at that point that things begin to get complicated. Nasty little bacteria go to work if you're not careful—and instead of wine you get vinegar.

Since Gordon was born into a doctor's rather than a winemaker's family, with no one to pass on treasured family secrets, there were a lot of things he had to work out for himself. There's no mystique about it, though.

"Let's face it," he says, "the winemaker is really a farmer and it's a helluva problem being a farmer—bugs, wind—all the elements come into play and you're constantly fighting them all."

That's about all the average farmer and the winemaker have in common, though. When dry years like '63 through '66 had most Pennsylvania farmers screaming about their corn withering or wheat not germinating and all the Main Line types with their horses were going bankrupt because they had to import their feed from Iowa, Gordon was having a ball: all that sunshine was doing gorgeous things to his grapes.

But when the rains came in '67, well, the winemaker had problems. "The grapes produced lots of juice—but it wasn't very good," Gordon recalls. "And 1971 was almost a complete bust."

When the year is downright lousy, such as this past one, some of Conestoga's grapes get sold to a bulk processor in New Jersey. Bulk processors aren't fussy. They dump all kinds of grapes into a vat, and their wine is just as bad from one year to the next, with no exception.

Then there are other years that are a little difficult to judge, and unfortunately, some of his less than optimum wine sneaks by onto the shelves of the State Store, Gordon admits. The Commonwealth is Conestoga's only customer. It buys his entire yield, about 600 to 700 cases in a good year, and markets it across the counter at \$2.57 a bottle, or to restaurants which mark it up to two or three times that price.

In Pennsylvania the grape grower can't be just a farmer, he's got to be somewhat of a gambler, too. Every spring it's just about like shooting craps, and if it rains at harvest time, he can see his whole bankroll washed away.

More than a bankroll, too, because a winery, on six acres, at least, isn't a very profitable venture to start with. There's a lot of hard work involved, too. Everyone, including Gordon's kids, weeds and prunes and puts in long hours during the season, and at harvest time they recruit a motley crew of pickers to supplement the family labor. His present wife gets in the act then. In the fall she comes along to run the picking crew with all the firmness her 98 pounds can muster. She gets involved in the tasting process, too, where Gordon admits he really respects her judgment. "She has a really fine palate, the best I've ever encountered in a woman." He concedes that the whole wine industry is male chauvinist in orientation.

Gordon is actually even more of a gambler than most of his breed. The greatest number of his vines are hybrids—actually a cross between the "noble" European grape (*vitis vinifera*) and the common American species. But he's out to prove the impossible with the rest of his vines: that he can make the noble grape survive unhybridized in Pennsylvania. The main problem seems to be phylloxera—native plant lice that attack the roots.

It's that phylloxera, along with mildew and rot, that did in most of the previous Pennsylvania vineyards that played with European vines. But those little soil lice didn't only play havoc here—they damn near wiped out the European wine industry at one point, too, when somebody carried a bundle of American vines to France and infected every vineyard in the country.

After the infestation, the European vineyards, in desperation, took the tops of their dying vines and grafted them onto native American rootstock, which is somehow resistant to the disease.

All the great vineyards still depend on this grafting process. But it's a real problem, slow and expensive. To overcome it, the Europeans began experimenting with hybridizing. They took their noble species and crossbred it to an American commoner, in an attempt to get a high quality, hardy vine. Native American vines are resistant to drought, humidity, heat, cold, almost anything—and they're

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big producers. Brash, tough and foxy, like the original pioneers. Not fine and classy like the European aristocrats. But the marriage was pretty good and the offspring turned out O.K.

Like almost any newcomers, though, the hybrids had a hard time gaining acceptance and it wasn't until World War II when the Germans copped the best wines and the French ran out of insecticides that they finally accepted the hybrids. However the hybrids are still not admitted to the inner sanctum of the great growths. No cross-breeding here—there still have to be some things one can count on to remain pure.

So it may be the desire to identify his crop, at least somewhat, with the greats that spurs Gordon on to thumb his nose at the lice and will those *vitis vinifera* to survive.

But he's not altogether hung up on things French. He refused to follow the French, for example, in the matter of a label. His is simple and elegant and distinctively American.

For the time being at least, he uses the Burgundy-shaped bottle, but it's strictly a matter of convenience—he can get them. Not too easily even at that, because to get them at all he has to buy them by the carload—and that's an awful lot of bottles for one little winery to sell. If ever Conestoga expands, though, Mel Gordon looks forward to designing a new shape, uniquely his and uniquely American.

And who knows when that expansion may come. With Pennsylvania's newfound interest in winegrowing as a legitimate business and the recent passage of a law allowing the wineries to sell their product right on the premises, the wine growing business may suddenly catch on. For 13 years Conestoga had a monopoly in the state. As of this year it shares honors on the State Store list with another Pennsylvania vineyard—Penn Shore of Presque Isle, near Erie. Pennsylvania in 1972 is still only a nice little wine-growing state. But it's a good year. In fact, one is pleasantly amused by its presumption. ■ ■ ■