

THE SPARKLING SCIENTIST

Red Tail Ridge
winemaker
Nancy Irelan with a
bottle from her new
sparkling line, Limnad.



Nancy Irelan
was an executive
at the biggest
winery in
California. Now
she's doing her
own thing in the
Finger Lakes.

BY
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Red Tail Ridge's property spans 50 acres along the shores of New York's Seneca Lake.

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—Nancy Irelan

A few sips of any Red Tail Ridge wine is enough for you to feel like you've stumbled across something remarkable. And after a few minutes with Nancy Irelan, its visionary vigneron, you'll understand why.

Irelan took a nontraditional path to wine—no romantic vineyards, wealthy collectors, or mentorship under a famous sommelier. When I ask her about her dreams as a young person, she says, “My whole life I knew I wanted to be a Ph.D. and a scientist.”

Having a purpose is not a straight path to success. Early in her career, she worked in a DuPont lab testing experimental pesticides. Irelan knew there had to be a better way to live.

At the time, molecular biology and plant genetics were at the forefront of crop improvement. She pursued it at UC Davis and got a Ph.D. in grape genetics and physiology. Very little was known about the field back then, and the sky was the limit for

research. It also placed her in the heart of America's wine industry.

Northern California suited Irelan. She collaborated with viticulture students, attended sustainability festivals, and connected with wine-industry professionals.

In 1994, right after finishing her Ph.D., Irelan was hired as one of the first female managers at E. & J. Gallo Winery, the largest producer in the world by volume. She set a path for the future, utilizing science, technology, and innovation to improve their operations, from grape growing to vinification.

It's not an exaggeration to say that, during her 12 years at Gallo, she helped revolutionize the U.S. wine industry. The company designed a new research facility and filled it with scientists studying everything from pathogens to varietal biomarkers to trellising systems. Irelan's team became vineyard investigators and were dispatched to address any problems at Gallo.

She was eventually promoted to VP and found herself in meetings with consultants

from companies like Taco Bell and Chevron. The distance between running a winery and corporate strategy widened daily.

Nancy and her husband, Mike Schnelle, decided it was time for a change, to find a place of their own. Achieving financial independence was essential, so they eliminated the West Coast. Climate, soil, and technical knowledge led them to the Finger Lakes.

The idea of establishing herself in New York was refreshing. “Stylistically the wines are completely unique,” she says. “The opposite of what I'd been working with in California. The wines are very delicate, with good acidity, low alcohol, not very extracted.”

Their first harvest was in 2006—a half ton of Pinot Noir, transformed into a sparkling Blanc de Noir. Schnelle thought she was insane; almost nobody in the region was making Blanc de Noir. “I don't care,” she said at the time. “If nobody buys it, I'll drink it.” And that was the birth of Red Tail Ridge Winery.



Irelan says she was channeling Wall Street's Fearless Girl statue while staring down her dirty grape press.

In the beginning, Schnelle spent most of his time in the vineyard, while Irelan worked in the cellar. But over time, she has found herself spending more time outdoors. She's connected the dots from soil to glass, even reverse-engineering wines, starting with a vision of how she wants a wine to taste, then adjusting vineyard practices to shape the wine before it reaches the cellar.

Irelan feels the Finger Lakes was the right move. John Sellar, executive VP at Independence Wine and Spirits, agrees. "We chose her wine because Nancy has extraordinary passion and knowledge," he says. "She is a visionary who understands the local terroir, focusing not only on still wine but championing sparkling wines that work so well in the upstate climate. She never stops innovating."

The Finger Lakes is best known for Riesling, and she makes several fine bottlings of it. In terms of reds, the region has struggled to find its signature varietal. Irelan's drive to experiment has pushed her to plant slews of options. From her elegant Pinot Noir and spicy Cabernet Franc to an esoteric Teroldego and a playful Dornfelder, she's managed to create a collection of reds that are some of the area's finest.

It's Irelan's incredible Blaufränkisch, though, that could answer the call and become the region's trademark red. Usually marketed locally as Lemberger, this is Irelan's most illuminating still wine. Ultra-fine tannins and zippy acidity coalesce with ripe cranberry and cherry; a touch of incense and a stony minerality linger on the finish for what may be the best red wine in New York.

Her bubbles, though, are the pinnacle of her success. Red Tail Ridge started with a sparkler, but it was never the intended focus. "We continue to make still wines, but my heart and soul are focused on making the domestic leader in high-quality sparkling," Irelan says.

Indeed, Red Tail Ridge has made significant investments in their sparkling-wine infrastructure: Specialized equipment, labor-intensive processes, and pricier bottles, corks, and cages make them more expensive to produce than other wines. Add in three to five years of maturation, the absence of cash flow during that period, plus the space to store that many vintages, and you can understand why few small growers attempt high-quality sparklers at scale.

“She is so scarily smart. She could have been an astronaut or something, and we are all so lucky that she chose to make wine.”

—Julia Burke

The economics necessitate raising prices, figures that don't line up neatly with her well-priced still wines. Irelan's keen sense of branding led her to spin off most of her sparkling wine into a separate entity, Limnad. The name is a type of water nymph, and a nod to the lakes that make this wine region viable.

Limnad's just-released debut includes several single-varietal, traditional-method, extra-brut sparklers, aged for

four years on the lees, and a lively Pinot Noir pét nat. Perpétuelle Change, her delicious nod to non-vintage Champagne, and the bubbly reds will remain under the Red Tail Ridge label. The bottlings from both brands are well on their way to becoming the new benchmark for sparkling wines in the U.S.

“Experience has taught me that the future of this region is solidly linked to sparkling wine ... It's something that



Irelan and her husband, Mike Schnelle, doing heavy lifting in the vineyard.

The just-released Limnad 2020 Blanc de Noir, aged for four years on the lees.

Mother Nature gifts to us each year: naturally derived, high-quality base wines for sparkling production,” Irelan says.

Irelan is warm and approachable, with a gift for explaining complex ideas clearly, sprinkling in scientific terms without ever sounding condescending. “She is so scarily smart,” says Julia Burke, wine buyer and events manager at Flatiron Wines & Spirits in NYC. “She could have been an astronaut or something, and we are all so lucky that she chose to make wine.”

I ask Irelan what she wishes more people knew about wine. She pauses, and finally says, “That it doesn't have to be complicated. It can just be really enjoyable. They're there to be a catalyst to improve the interface for the meal or the conversation.”

Vignerons born into wine tend to experience it through a narrow lens. Some people get into wine after being exposed to inspiring bottles. And another group finds themselves in wine factories, devoid of creativity and passion.

Irelan's path was idiosyncratic. She fell in love with wine by studying its formation from life's building blocks, guiding grapes, yeast, and bacteria into enchanting expressions. If magic is science unexplained, Irelan uses science to make magic in a bottle.

LEFT: RYAN BAILEY, RIGHT: BRIAN MICHAEL KINNEY