

A Quirky Tradition continues in the Finger Lakes

By Nancy Tisch

In the Finger Lakes AVA, there is a lovely tradition of **Secret Cellar** that began as the brainchild of Kelby Russell back in 2013. It was developed as a way for winemakers and their teams to secretly support one another during the long, arduous days of harvest. As those in the industry know, the days are numerous – often with no time off for 30 or 40 day stretches. And some of those days can be long - starting with hauling fruit from the vineyard early in the morning, crushing, pressing, pitching yeasts, monitoring fermentations, and then cleaning up the crush pad late in the evening – only to start all over on the next day.

When asked about the origins of the tradition, Kelby had this to say: “It came from my first vintage of making the KJR label wines and shooting up to Nutt Road one late evening after work at Red Newt. I sampled the Cab Franc that would eventually become my 2013 rosé via the headlights of my car, then headed north to Geneva, only to see that the production facility at Anthony Road was still brightly lit up as they worked late. I swung by and said hello and brought some beer and was treated to a lovely quick tasting by Johannes Rheinhart and Peter Becraft.

As I drove home 30 minutes later, I kept thinking about how all of us in our cellars are little bastions of light late into harvest nights, islands unto ourselves, but connected by our common work and purpose. And from there I thought it would be fun to try and have cellars give gifts to one another in recognition of that connection.”

The guidelines for participants in Secret Cellar are straightforward: agree to participate and share some love and support for another winemaking team by anonymously sending them a couple of “care packages” during the harvest season. Only on the final package (typically 3, but there are no hard and fast requirements) do you reveal your identity – often by sending some wines from your own cellar. Or in some cases, the winemakers make a personal delivery to reveal their identity at the end of harvest.

The 2023 harvest was Bet the Farm Winery's first time as a Secret Cellar participant. Shopping for the secret gift packages was so much fun! Some common themes – both on the giving and receiving end, were Instant IV for keeping up with hydration, snacks galore including cookies, nuts, pretzels, candy, mac and cheese, tea, coffee – all the things the crews need to feel taken care of during those long workdays. And of course, there was beer – typically craft beers from one of the local breweries. As the saying goes, “It takes a lot of beer to make good wine!”

Some of the Secret Cellars get super creative – making the gift carry a theme. For example, Dave Breeden of Sheldrake Point Winery shared a photo of their dinosaur themed package (see photo) that included Dinosaur BBQ sauce, dino toys, straws and a note that read, “Some may see us as professional winos, but we're really kids at heart who want to play with dinos. We hope you make time for fun and a warm lunch, something well-deserved for such a hard-working bunch. We're nearly there on harvest 2023, so raise a glass, a White Claw, or even some tea!” Such imagination and creativity!

And then there's the issue of maintaining a secret identity until the end. Have you ever tried to mail a package without a return address? They don't really like that at the post office. And of course, it's not a great idea to use your own UPS or FedEx account – until the great reveal at the end, of course. August Demiel posted this in 2020, “Recently got a great package from our Secret Cellar. It came in a repurposed toilet paper box with an interesting note on the side. (see photo below) Accidental identity giveaway? Or brilliant red herring? We're dying to know. What do you think, [Meagz Goodwin](#)???” (see photo)

Facebook is a treasure trove of Secret Cellar photos. Simply write “Secret Cellar” in the search bar and see what pops up. All the participants are clearly caring – sending their recipients bountiful goodness in the form of snacks, meals, beverages, and humor. And some are incredibly creative and talented - not entirely surprising for winemakers and their lot. In 2019, Red Newt received a gift that included Finger Lakes harvest lyrics to a rap song (see photo).

Most importantly, though, there is a common theme of comradery and gratitude in the Facebook posts:

“It lends an atmosphere of good cheer to what can be a stressful time of year.”

“Thank you so much! You’re a savior and this is easily the best tradition I’ve been part of in my 20 years making wine.”

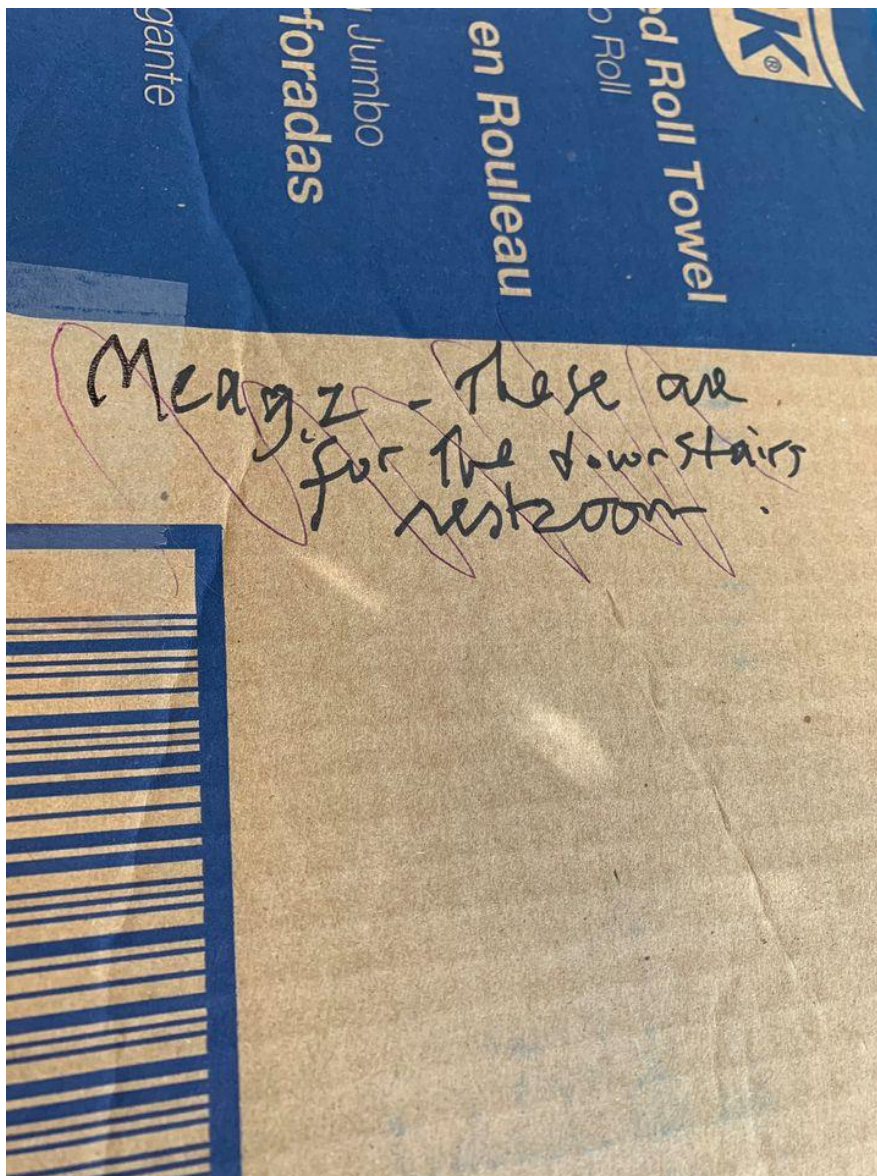
“Personal delivery by our Secret Cellar friends, Sam and Aaron of Three Brothers! Nice to be part of this great Finger Lakes Wine Community !!”

“We have no idea who has sent us this lovely gift, but we are oh so happy they did! We are happy to be part of such an awesome Finger Lakes winery tradition!”

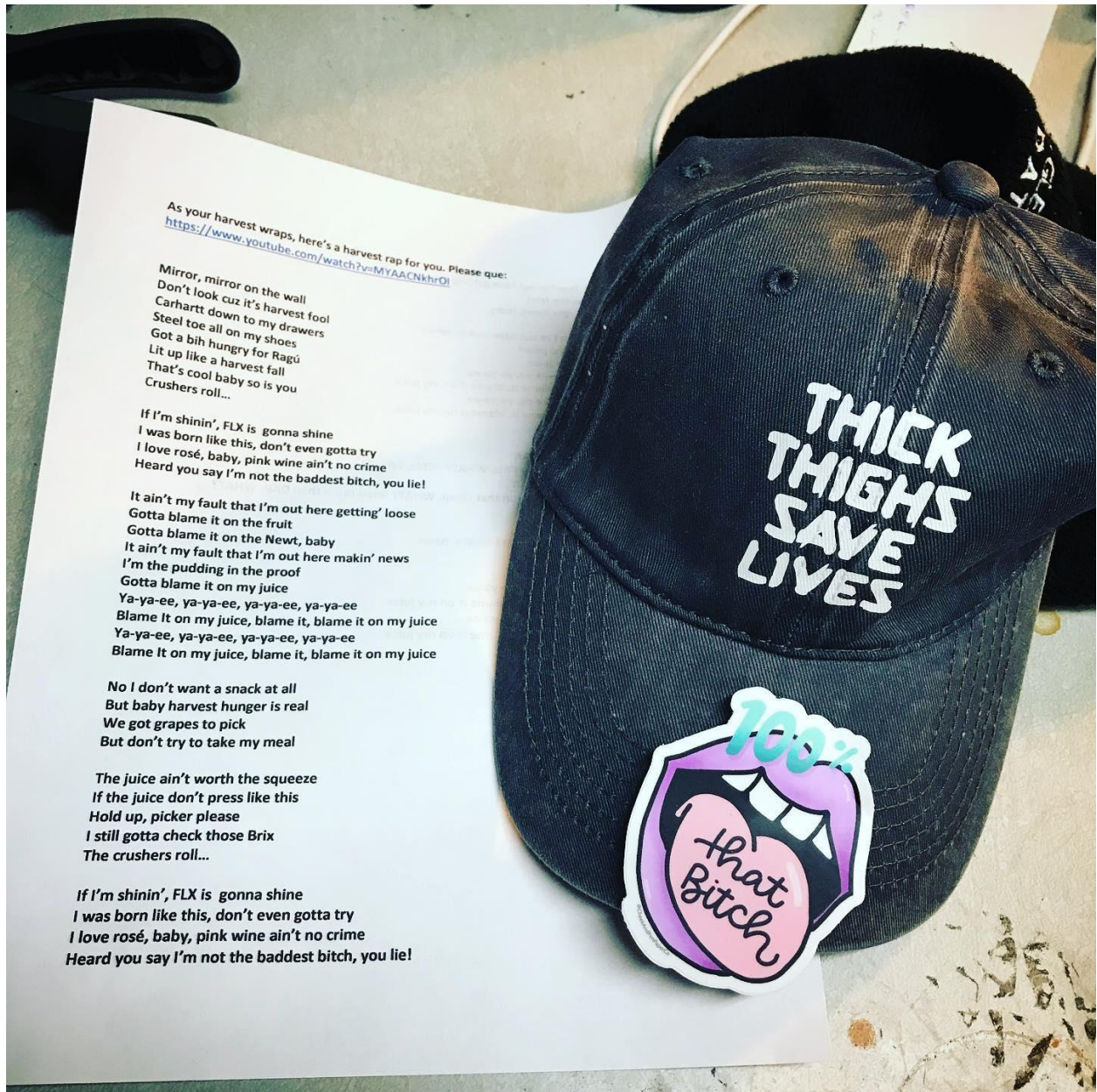
Conceived in 2013 and born during the 2014 harvest with only ten or twelve wineries participating, the tradition has continued to grow. Now in its tenth year, thirty-three wineries participated! From Kelby, “So far as I know it isn't practiced in any other wine regions, although I would love to hear some day that someone has heard of it from us and has exported it!” Clearly, those other regions don't know what they are missing!



Dinosaur themed gift received by Dave Breeden and the Sheldrake Point Winery crew.
Photo credit: Dave Breeden on Facebook.



Package was received in a recycled box. Was this a hint or red herring? Photo credit: August Demiel on Facebook.



A 2019 example of extraordinary creativity in the Secret Cellar package. Photo credit: Kelby Russell on Facebook.