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Dear Warren,

Many thanks for your Christmas card, and the copy of your long letter to Charlie and Betty, and your musical CD (for which congratulations!)

I have a confession to make: Your Christmas card of the previous year has been sitting on my desk for a year now, in my 'In' box! And so your latest card and news prompts me at long last to assuage my guilt by responding. Please forgive my tardiness.

It is good to know you're keeping up and enjoying your piano business. A propos, I'm enclosing for your interest a recent article from our local paper on Mark Veenman, a piano technician like yourself, whom perhaps you know. But if not, perhaps you will want to get in touch with him. (We just had our old piano tuned, by a man named Klaus Hilscher – and what a difference! It now sounds light and clear, even joyful! We let it go far too many years.)

I'm sure Betty has kept you well informed about most of all our comings and goings, but I wonder if she told you about one of our interesting happenings his past summer? Assuming she hasn't, I shall relate it to you.

I could entitle it 'Making (drinkable) blueberry wine'.

You know, I think, that one of our farm hobbies is making wine? We've made it out of anything and everything: dandylions, elderberries, elderflowers, raspberries, parsnips (yes!) -- but especially blueberries. Linda and I have been involved with blueberries ever since we purchased our 100-acre farm in 1991. Here on sandy soil wild low-bush blueberries are a weed. (When we were looking to buy the property, Betty exclaimed 'It's got blueberries! There's at least 35% cover in the field above the house! You've got to buy it for the blueberries!') Although we were looking primarily for a farm on which to keep our three horses, the blueberry possibility intrigued us.

And, over the years, we learned a lot about growing blueberries. We learned about the two-year fruiting cycle, about the need for extremely acid soil (pH of 5.0), about the dangers of burning the field – not so much to the blueberries as to the surrounding foliage. (One year I destroyed ten newly planted pine-nut trees and actually set the compost pile on fire. Only the dirt road that runs across the end of the blueberry field prevented the fire from setting the woods beyond ablaze.) And about the back-breaking work involved in raking berries, waddling through the field like ducks on a

fool's errand, a job for which we could find no willing workers. We also learned, as berry production on our four-acre field fell steadily from year to year, that it is impossible to grow blueberries organically. There are pernicious and insidious weeds (goldenrod, meadowsweet known hereabouts as hard-hack, wild cherries, tough curly acid-loving grasses) that love the same growing conditions as *Vaccinium angustifolium*, which can only be defeated by a judicious bi-annual dose of herbicide in the non-fruiting year. So we had to drop our organic certification.

The learning curve, as they say, was steep. U-Picking netted us no money and took away our cherished privacy. Cleaning away the leaves and sticks and other vegetation (and ants and spiders) from the raked berries, in order to sell the berries fresh at Fredericton farmer's market, proved to be prohibitively time consuming (at least at the micro-farm level), and anyway selling retail off the farm was a lot of work and not much fun. That is why we decided to turn all our harvested berries into either syrup or wine.

The wine from blueberries had always tasted less 'home-made', more 'professional' than our other attempts at home-made wine (some of which were pretty bad). Our daughter Lila and her friends loved crushing the berries, which they did with their feet in a giant steel pot. They paraded around afterwards in their purple stockings like so many Roman Catholic church dignitaries. We pressed the pulped berries with a home-made and somewhat rickety apple press, fermented the juice in containers in the basement, racked the wine as it matured, and eventually bottled it. Our son Jason, a computer nut from birth, had even designed distinctive bottle labels. Now we were venturing into a bigger league. Instead of turning a few pounds of berries into wine (it takes about 5 pounds to produce 1 litre of juice, which with the addition of the required sugar solution and fermentation and rackings eventually produces about a litre of wine), we were going to attempt to vinify several hundred pounds at a time.

That meant acquiring proper equipment: a motorized blueberry rake (no more bending over), a stainless steel grape crusher that growls fearsomely and threatens to crush one's fingers, several heavy plastic 96-litre barrels for enzymic extraction of the juice from the pulp, a proper Italian fruit press with a diabolically clever ratcheting mechanism to increase the human arm's leverage, a 60-litre stainless steel propane-fired boiler for preparing the sugar solution, several 23-litre glass carboys with fermentation air-locks, dozens and dozens of wine bottles, a proper floor-model corker, the list went on. A large expense, but we were serious.

The new equipment and supplies barely fitted into the old stone cellar. But by the spring of 2003 there were enough bottles of wine from the 2002 harvest for us to think of entering a wine competition.

We heard about the Indy International Wine Competition (hosted annually by Purdue University at the Indiana State Fair in West Lafayette, Indiana) and that they had a section for amateur non-grape wines, and so in 2003 we entered samples of our 2002 vintage home-made blueberry wine. We actually won a bronze medal, which was greatly encouraging, and the following year entered both an elderflower wine and our 2003-vintage blueberry, and again won a couple of bronze medals!

So, with our medals, we felt we were on our way. Who knew? We might even think about selling our blueberry wine, especially since new legislation in New Brunswick theoretically allowed "farm gate" wine sales.

We kept at it for the next few years, thinking to perfect our wine-making process before "going commercial." We ordered a great quantity of new wine bottles from Italy, in a beautiful shade of blue (naturally), sixty dozen, a full pallet. And a new red-wood wine-rack kit from B.C. to hold all the bottles. We submitted a sample of our bottled 2005 vintage and our expectations in the summer of 2006 were high. Does pride ever cometh before a fall!

Following are some of the judges' comments on the 'Amateur Score Sheet' of our submission:

Taste: "Poor. Disagreeable flavors. Off aftertaste, bacterial." "Deficient."

Aftertaste: "Unpleasant." "Off at end."

Overall: "Poor."

Judge scores: "NM" [No Medal]

Ouch!

Chastened and discouraged, we reviewed our situation. Linda tried to cheer us up by explaining that it was no doubt my attempt to re-bottle the '05 vintage that had somehow spoiled it. (I had indeed re-bottled our submitted competition entry, having noticed a particularly heavy deposit in the wine bottles and not wanting it to get stirred up in the post and thus do badly in the "Clarity" category. At least the re-bottling worked for that category: the '05 blueberry was judged to be "brilliant." But clarity was totally overwhelmed by the "offness" of taste and aftertaste. Overall disaster.)

Should we continue, or abandon the wine-making altogether? Linda and I both had become quite addicted to our own wine, so we had to admit our own bias. Some of our friends and neighbours were supportive. Yet there is lots of other farm work to be done, and blueberry raking and wine-making take up a good chunk of time in August and September, just when second-cut hay and garden harvesting have to be done. But hope springs eternal. We decided to give it one more try.

The summer of 2006 proved bounteous, at least as far as blueberries were concerned. (The hay was another matter.) Myriads of the farm's little wild bees, far more efficient than honey bees, did their usual efficient germination of the blossoms. Rain showers and hot sun alternated in equal measure throughout June and July, fattening the berries with moisture and baking the juice within. Sugar content of the berries reached a record 35 gravity (specific gravity of 1.035). Our resident crows and foxes and deer either understood FHB or, more likely, couldn't keep up with the fruiting.

A record crop, in quantity and, more important, in quality. We crushed and extracted and pressed and fermented. For weeks the smell of ferment wafted up from the cellar and through the house. We carried out more rackings than usual before bottling, to eliminate the heavy deposit that fermenting blueberry juice for some reason produces. The wine had a real perfume and tasted more like a decent Burgundy than a home-made fruit wine. We carefully sterilized bottles and corks before bottling. And we labelled two bottles, securely bubble-wrapped them, and in May of this year sent them off to the judges at the Indy International, Department of Food Sciences, Purdue University, Indiana.

On August 16th, this summer, my sixty-seventh birthday as it happened, a package from the Indy International Wine Competition appeared in our mailbox. I hesitated to open it. Jason, the designer of the wine labels as a young lad and now a university student at Mt A spending his summer working with me on the farm, took it out of my hesitant hands and ripped it open. A shout. "Hey, Dad, we did it!" Our '06 blueberry wine had won a gold medal! Unbelievable. We celebrated, you can imagine how!

Warren, I've bored you long enough with my wine-making saga, so I'll quit. Linda joins me in sending you and Patty much love and best wishes for a happy 2008!

Tony