Grace Notes

Why the vineyards of New York called Kelby Russell home
by Erick Trickey

Every September and October, Kelby James Russell ’09 spends seven days a week walking through sloping vineyards above New York’s Seneca Lake. Vine canopies arch above his head, seven or eight feet tall. Bands of golden grapes cascade down. Russell, head winemaker at Red Newt Cellars Winery, picks a grape and tastes it. It’s incredibly sweet, much more so than a table grape, not at all like the wine it’ll become. “A Riesling grape tends to taste like beautiful floral notes and tangerine and peach,” Russell says, “almost a honey-like sweetness.”

The exact notes he tastes get him thinking about his plan for the rest of the harvest: when to send in the mechanical picker, and “what the different parcels are going to want to be as wine”—dry or off-dry, destined for a reserve wine or for Red Newt’s house style.

Ever since Russell graduated, he’s embraced the challenges of winemaking in the Finger Lakes region, where he grew up. Now 31, he’s a specialist in the art of cold-climate white wines. Working with the East Coast’s fickle climate “allows you to throw out the false idol of a perfect wine,” he says. “You come to understand that your job as winemaker is to artfully direct what comes into the winery into the best thing and the most honest expression of the year that you possibly can.”

In November, after the harvest, Russell’s work shifts indoors. The grapes are pressed, and the juice settles and starts to ferment. “You hear this gentle chorus of things bubbling away,” he says: 50 to 60 tanks of Riesling, and a few barrels and tanks of cabernet franc and other varieties, burble as carbon dioxide escapes through water locks. “A lot of [tanks] smell beautifully of fruit, whether it’s peaches or strawberry ice cream,” he says. “Sometimes in our cellar you get a lot of grapefruit and things that almost smell like basil, these really interesting herbal green aromatics.” For Russell, it’s the most
fun part of the work year. “My job is to taste them every day,” he says, “and decide to gen-
tly try steer [their] direction”—with more oxygen, perhaps, or more heat.

At Harvard, Russell concentrated in gov-
ernment, minored in economics, threw him-
sel into the Glee Club, and planned a career in orchestra management. Like many col-
lege students from the exurbs or the coun-
try, he never thought he would move back home. But during a foreign study tour in
Tuscany, he made wine for the first time.
“I could never forget how much I enjoyed working with my hands, and the creative side of winemaking,” he says. The autumn after graduation, when a job at Jazz at Lincoln Center didn’t pan out, he visited
Fox Run Vineyards near his hometown.
He thought he had an interview, but the staff was busy with the first day of harvest.
“They were knee deep in grapes,” he recalls.
“They handed me a shovel: ‘Here you go.

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“allows you to throw out the false idol of
a perfect wine.”

You can help out on the crush pad if you’d like.” He kept showing up, completing an
unpaid internship.

Fascinated, he began an accelerated set of apprenticeships in winemaking. For three
years, to double his harvest experience, he spent winters in New Zealand or Austra-
lia, and autumns in the Finger Lakes. He
started his first year-round salaried job in
spring 2012, as Red Newt’s assistant winem-
aker. By year’s end, Red Newt co-founder
and longtime winemaker David Whiting
stepped out of the wine cellar to oversee the winery’s bistro—and promoted Russell
to pursue the winemaking in the way that
he says, “gave me tons of freedom to

In the year 1510, at a private residence in the capital city of Kyoto, two men raised their wine cups to celebrate the completion of an extraordinary project, an album of 54 pairs of calligraphy and painting leaves representing each chapter of Japan’s most celebrated work of fiction, The Tale of Genji. One of the men, the patron of the album Sue Saburo, would take it back with him to his home province of Suo (present-day Yamaguchi Prefec-
ture), on the western end of Japan’s main island. Six years later, in 1516, the album leaves would be donated to a local temple named Myoeiji, where the work’s trace-
able premodern history currently ends. In
1957 it came into the possession of Philip Hofer (1898-1984), founder of the Dep-
artment of Prints and Graphic Arts at the Houghton Rare Book Library of Har-
vard University. A prolific collector of il-
ustrated manuscripts, Hofer purchased the album along with numerous other
Japanese books and scrolls, which were subsequently bequeathed to the Harvard
Art Museums in 1985. This remarkable compendium has survived intact for over
500 years, making it the oldest complete album of Genji painting and calligraphy in the world.…

Although steeped in the complex belief systems and moral codes of its own era…

A boat cast adrift: visualizing the text,
“Though the orange tree isle/Remain fast in its color/’Tis not such change/But this drifting boat’s whither/That is beyond all knowing.”

the tale can be read as a monumental ex-
ploration of human nature. No matter how characters may triumph or what virtues they may exhibit, all ultimately confront hardships and grapple with their own fallibility, none more so than the eponymous protagonist Genji. To give voice to her characters’ internal conflicts and thought processes, Murasaki Shikibu took unprecedented advantage of…the affective power and ironic distance effect of waka poetry, and a mode of prose nar-
ration similar to stream of consciousness and free indirect discourse in Western
literature. The shifting perspective of the narrator throughout the work also makes for a reading experience surprisingly akin to that of the modern novel.

One need not know how to read Japanese
To savor The Tale of Genji in translation, to
by Melissa McCormick, professor of Japa-
nese art and culture (Princeton, $45). The story she tells, drawing on the justly famous underlying work (see “Vita: Murasaki Shikibu,” May-June 2002, page 32, illustrated by some of the art discussed below), is simplicity itself—so long as one can overlook the remarkable survival of a fragile masterpiece for more than five centuries. An associated exhibition—on the artistic tradition inspired by the novel, curated by McCormick—opens at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on March 5. From the introduction:

In the Finger Lakes, that means explor-
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bear,” he says, “to prove to people that that
isn’t true, and that Riesling can be a great
grape.” His own generation of wine-drink-
ers, he says, is shifting the market toward
the Finger Lakes’ strengths: lower alcohol,
mores finesse—“They’re far more interest-
ed and open to new wine regions and new
expressions.”
Artistic Capital

In Liz Glynn’s massive installations, big questions about the meaning of value
by Samantha Culp

For some artists, MASS MoCA’s iconic Building Five would be a daunting space to fill. The length of a football field, the 30,000 square-foot former textile mill is the nation’s largest free-standing gallery, and the centerpiece of one of its most prestigious museums. But for Liz Glynn ’03, a Boston-born, Los Angeles-based artist known for ambitious projects like attempting to literally rebuild Rome in a day, it was the ideal setting for a new work. “I saw MASS MoCA for the first time when I was 19,” Glynn says. “It was the place that made me want to make sculpture.” In late 2017, she became the youngest artist to take on the space with the exhibition “The Archaeology of Another Possible Future” (now extended through early 2019). It’s a sprawling landscape of shipping containers, reclaimed forklift pallets, 3-D printers, industrial felt, glazed stoneware, vinyl records, and towering pyramids in the shape of economic charts. The piece interrogates the notion of progress itself, and particularly the American dream as it interweaves with the history of material production and consumption. Increasingly, financial value arises from high-speed, algorithmic trading—not on the physical factory floor, like Building Five once was—and Glynn’s installation asks, “Where does real value exist?” And what does the answer to that question mean for a society that is perhaps more unequal than ever before? Glynn’s practice, which spans sculpture and performance, has always given shape to abstract systems. Her interests in class, labor, and its divisions began in her youth, growing up in Boston’s South Shore suburbs with an architect mother and engineer father. “My father’s family identified as blue-collar, my mother’s a bit more upper middle class, but they were from the same town,” she says, recalling how she first realized class differences could almost be an “arbitrary distinction” within a shared geography.

She considered becoming an architect or photojournalist, which led her to Harvard, where legendary photographer Nan Goldin was then teaching. Glynn also drew inspiration from fields like economics (her freshman year, she took Ec 10 from Baker professor of economics Martin Feldstein), while concentrating in visual and environmental studies. She attributes her even-

Six harvests into his position as head winemaker, Russell not only masterminds the Red Newt’s house styles and reserves, he’s in charge of his own Kelby James Russell label, which features small-batch wines, from a dry rose to an Australian-style dry Riesling. He helped found and oversees the Empire Estate wine project, a Riesling label that distributes more than 10,000 cases of wine from several Finger Lakes vineyards to 48 states. He met his wife, Julia Hoyle, thanks to their shared love of wine: when he was a Fox Run intern, she worked in the tasting room. Now she’s head winemaker at Hosmer Winery on Cayuga Lake.

Though he’s dedicated his career to the art of winemaking, Russell has also returned to his love of music. He travels 90 minutes from his home in Geneva to sing as a tenor in the Eastman Rochester Chorus. His private wine label suggests song pairings instead of food pairings: music by Janelle Monáe, Radiohead, and Parliament Funkadelic.

“Winemaking is such a puzzle,” he says. “There’s thousands and thousands of decisions, and there’s no right or wrong answer.” It’s a natural fit with his social-theory training at Harvard, he says: “how to grapple with an impossible number of inputs and navigate through what makes sense.”