CHÂTEAU HOUGH
Cultivating a Community Vineyard
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On a crisp, mid-September Northeast Ohio morning, a team of some 25 folks—consisting of both middle-aged adults and teens—convene at a local vineyard to harvest plump, ripe grapes earmarked for use in creating this year’s vintage.

The scene is not uncommon for an autumn day.

But what is unique about this particular vignette is that instead of occurring in a rural landscape along the city’s outskirts, it’s nested within an urban neighborhood of century-old houses and buildings on a former vacant lot at the corner of East 66th Street and Hough Avenue.

Aply named the Vineyards of Château Hough, the three-quarter-acre plot displays 294 vines in 14 neat rows. The rows are organized by grape variety—half white Traminette grapes from upstate New York and half Frontenac, a red grape from Wisconsin—two cold hardy varieties able to withstand Cleveland’s often unforgiving winters.

Just like the wines these grapes will soon produce, the workers on this day are also a blend—male and female, Caucasian and African American, and volunteers and paid workers, some transitioning back into society from prison.

Yet for as much enthusiasm as this urban vineyard has harvested locally and beyond, its raison d’être isn’t merely to create good will within this neighborhood in transition. Rather, it’s about building wealth in an inner-city community, according to the vineyard’s mastermind, Mansfield Frazier, a journalist and activist.

His nonprofit organization, Neighborhood Solutions, Inc., owns the previously foreclosed property, which was obtained gratis from the Cuyahoga County Land Bank. Château Hough, a project of his nonprofit, received funding from sources that included a grant from Re-Imagining Cleveland, a vacant land reuse initiative focusing on sustainable solutions.

The vineyard is in full view from Frazier’s house across the street, a handsome home he built on a former infill lot in 2000. He explains that he wanted to help re-establish and strengthen the black middle class in an urban environment. His home is one of several larger, impressive, and newer suburban-looking houses interspersed between older dwellings along Hough Avenue and adjacent streets.

He chose to plant a vineyard as opposed to other crops due to its ability to generate a profit.

“If a bell pepper is 50 cents here, it’s 50 cents there. With a $10 bottle of wine, the same bottle can be $100 if you tell the right story. If you tell a real good story and win some awards, it could go for $1,000.”

The initial crop was planted in 2010 and was first harvested in Fall 2013.

“The vines take seven years to mature. Most experts say you shouldn’t harvest until year four,” Frazier explains. “You want to pinch-off the grapes when they come in the first three years because they take energy from the vine and the root, and you want them to be stronger so they can weather something like a polar vortex. But we had so much interest in year three that we harvested a year early.”

The premier batch yielded 1,500 bottles of blended wines—Frontenac with Valdepena and Traminette with Viognier—that

Facing page: View from Château Hough looking west down Hough Avenue toward downtown Cleveland. Above: National Merit honor students from Garrett Morgan School of Science volunteer at Château Hough, helping with the harvest. Their teacher read about the vineyard and called to ask how they could help.
The BioCellar is designed to be an experimental space. From being a demonstration site for other neighborhoods, to testing plants that will grow well in the space, to housing the cistern that holds the rain water captured and used to water the vineyard or irrigate the rain garden, the building is all about learning.

were produced by Frazier's workers under the direction of the North Coast Wine Club in Solon. Last fall's harvest resulted in approximately 2,000 bottles of wine.

When asked about the taste, he notes that he's not a connoisseur.

“Wine tasting is so subjective. There's a whole language of wine that I just don't get involved in. I like it. That's all I can say. Compared to other wines that I've had, it's actually great and I'm pleasantly surprised how well it turned out.”

The red is full-bodied with a rich texture, he adds. The white, which garnered second place in its category at the 2014 Great Geauga County Fair, is intentionally sweet, as the grapes were used to make ice wine.

Frazier has plans to have an adjacent winery on the property one day. He is in the process of securing a liquor license that he hopes to have by year's end. In the interim, his nonprofit has

Jean Loria, the permaculture designer and the project's innovator, says this prototype is much more than a dilapidated structure stripped to its foundation and capped with a slanted greenhouse. Loria worked with Terry Schwarz, director of Kent State University's Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative and architect Rob Donaldson to bring the concept to life.

“Ecological design and biological equity—just access to and distribution of basic resources for living—are integral to BioCellar design and function,” Loria explains.

The structure is designed for maximum-incident sunlight capture during winter, and solar-shading in summer, Loria says. Rainwater is harvested from the roof and stored in an indoor, 1,500-gallon cistern for irrigation and cleaning.

Strategically placed vents prevent summer temperatures from exceeding 80°, Frazier notes. In winter, the temperature is kept around 50° by operating a one-room heater during frigid nights.

Château Hough is the embodiment of one of Mansfield Frazier’s favorite quotes by environmentalist Majora Carter, founder of Sustainable South Bronx, “I believe that you shouldn’t have to leave your neighborhood to live in a better one.”

been giving away bottles of wine with labels that direct recipients to the website if they wish to make a donation.

The property will soon include a free community garden, he adds, which will be cared for by both east and west side neighborhood volunteers. In addition to fresh produce, there are plans to plant hops.

Within this urban agricultural zone, the vineyard isn’t the only project on Hough Avenue.

Adjoining a foreclosed, abandoned house has been transformed into what is likely the world's very first BioCellar—an 800-square-foot passive solar greenhouse with a below-grade level derived from foundation remnants of the derelict building.

Kale, strawberries, herbs, edible flowers, corn, beans, and squash are among the BioCellar’s first experimental crops. Frazier eventually plans to grow Pinot Noir grapes using the hydroponic method, which uses liquid nutrient solutions instead of soil.

It's all a work in progress, he emphasizes.

“The BioCellar is not a production environment. It's an educational, experimental environment, and we will always be changing it to see what works,” Frazier says. “Then, in larger spaces, we can do full production.”

To learn more about the Vineyards and BioCellar of Château Hough, visit chateaughough.org.
Upper left: One of the Garrett Morgan students pours Château Hough grapes into a barrel. The grapes have just been "de-stemmed" and are being poured into the barrels for fermenting, where they will remain for approximately two weeks. Then the juice will be squeezed out of the skins and placed in the aging vats. Upper right: Mansfield Frazier, founder of Château Hough, lives across the street from the vineyard and remembers visiting the neighborhood as a teen to see his girlfriend. Lower: Master winemaker, Michael Caldwell, demonstrates how tests are done to determine pH balance, alcohol content, brix level (sweetness), and a number of other factors that have to be adjusted to insure a quality outcome.