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## A Yankee tradition

*A Taste of the Litchfield Hills returns for 19th year*

BY JAIME FERRIS

Neither rains nor clouds will stay the Yankee tradition of fine food and good friends this weekend when Haight Vineyard in Litchfield again presents A Taste of the Litchfield Hills. Now in its 19th year, the event, dubbed a "festival of fine fare in the summer air," offers visitors to the vineyard the opportunity to sample house specialties from Litchfield County culinary purveyors, Haight Vineyard wine and premium beer and to enjoy live entertainment, hayrides, ice carving, vineyard tours and shopping.

It is to take place June 26 from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. and June 27 from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Litchfield vineyard.

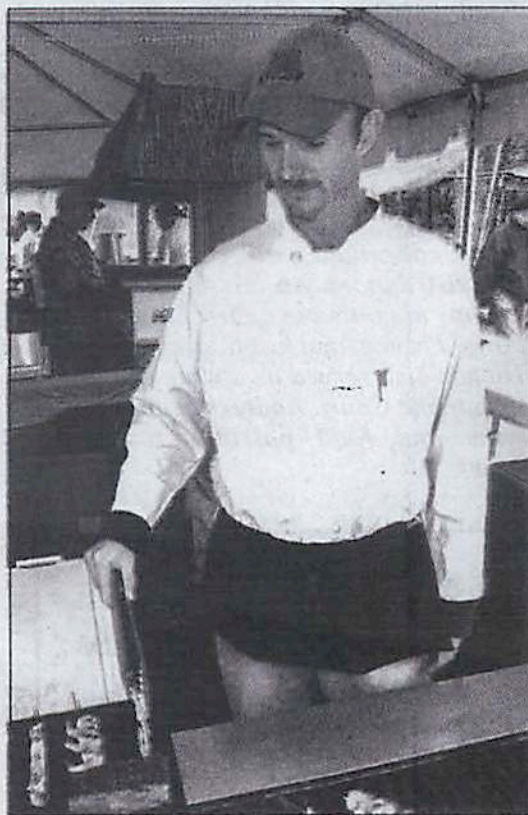
"It's hard to believe it's been 19 years," said event manager Clint Billups. He explained that the event draws thousands each year and was created partly in

response to a 1980s restaurant review by then-food critics Jane and Michael Stern, written before they collaborated on their national best-seller, "Eat Your Way Across the USA." In the review, the couple referred to Litchfield County as a "culinary wasteland."

"It's funny, because people would laugh at such a comment today," he said. "Just a drive through the area would reveal the abundance of choices."

Following that review, Mr. Billups explained, Sherman P. Haight Jr., a retired colonel and proprietor of Haight Vineyard, the state's oldest winery, approached Mr. Billups in hopes of helping the restaurant community. Mr. Billups, a former lieutenant, was commissioned by Col. Haight to create what he called "a battle plan." Local chefs, restaurateurs and residents, infuriated by the review,

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Fine food from Litchfield County culinary purveyors, Haight Vineyard wine and premium beer, live entertainment, hayrides, ice carving, vineyard tours and shopping are on tap this weekend during the 19th annual A Taste of the Litchfield Hills June 26 from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. and June 27 from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. File Photograph

# A Taste of the Litchfield Hills returns

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were enlisted for what later became an annual celebration of culinary fare in the region.

"As it was, there was no love lost between the Sterns and the local culinary community," Col. Haight recalled in an event release. "However, their uninformed 'culinary wasteland' remark didn't just leave a bad taste in our mouths. Those words actually created A Taste of the Litchfield Hills."

The first year drew a crowd of more than 1,000 and the event now attracts 3,000 to 5,000 people who come to enjoy what Col. Haight called "our celebration of fine fare."

"We've long since forgotten the name of the restaurant that was reviewed, but certainly not the Sterns' review, he said. "Of course, Jane and Michael are always welcome to attend our festival—just as long as they pay at the gate."

"What is most interesting is that no one ever envisioned that, 19 years later, that first festival would have grown into what it is today," Mr. Billups added. "In many ways, it's the unofficial kick off to the summer season in Litchfield County."

During the weekend food and wine fete, guests to the vineyard can sample what Mr. Billups called an eclectic menu—from boiled lobster, home-style cavatelli and barbecued ribs, to cheesecake, pastries and Italian ice. Diners can enjoy the fine fare under covered seating on the grounds or picnic with blankets and lawn chairs. Haight's award-

winning wine and beer is available by the glass in the vineyard's garden café, or one can quench thirst with Starbuck's specialty drinks, Stewart's old-fashioned soda or bottled water.

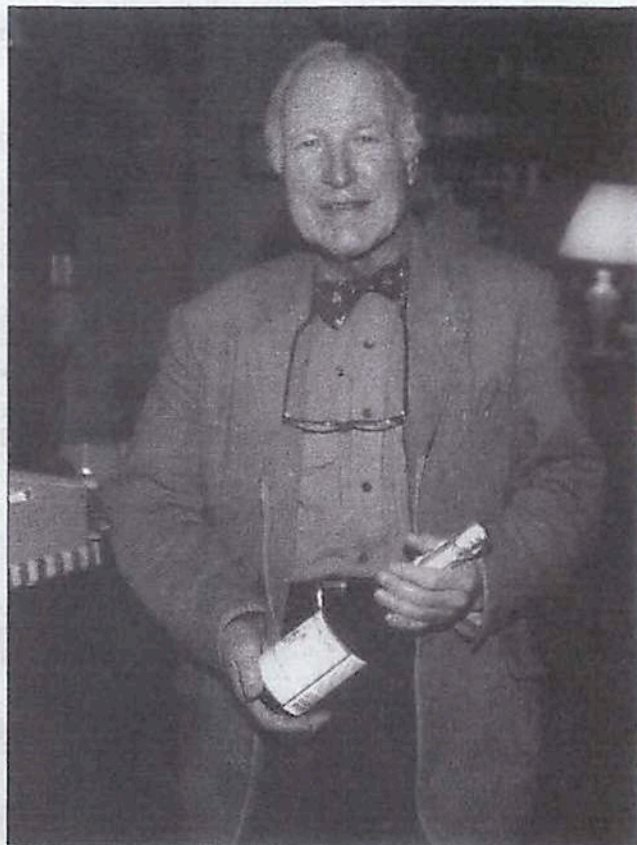
"Of course the menu has changed over the years, but we're trying to maintain the tradition," Mr. Billups said. "From day one, lobster has been a favorite—we New Englanders love our lobster."

"We've also noticed that a lot of people bring their children with them, so we have some specialties for them, too. We'll have one booth serving everything from French fries to sweet potato fries, but I would imagine that we'll see kids my age there, too," he said with a smile.

The celebration has grown significantly over the years. "One of the things people have said about the event is that they don't want to eat and run; but there's so much to sample," Mr. Billups stated. "You couldn't possibly eat it all at once, so we felt we needed to add some things to break it up."

So, visitors can take hayrides, vineyard tours and participate in complimentary wine tastings and shopping at "upscale vendors" between courses. Entertainment this year is to feature Music Gallery June 26 from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. and Point Black from 4 to 8 p.m. On June 27, Too Human is to perform from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., followed by ice carving at 1 p.m., and Tirebiter from 2 to 5 p.m.

With children in mind, the event introduces Space Maze, a soft play area for children featur-



Above, Colonel Sherman P. Haight, proprietor of Haight Vineyard, the home of the 19th annual A Taste of the Litchfield Hills, to be held June 26 from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. and June 27 from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Haight Vineyard in Litchfield. Below, scenes from last year's A Taste of the Litchfield Hills, "a festival of fine fare in the summer air." File Photographs

ing ball pits, a foam forest, cargo climbs, bouncing bumpers, web crawls and slides; making it even better, parents can observe their children traveling through the maze at all times.

"One of the most fun things is standing at the gate—people always approach me saying that they've been coming for 10 or 12 years, about how great the lobster was or that the clam chowder is better than last year," Mr. Billups said. "That's always a great thing to see. People really love this event."

"We try to keep [A Taste of the Litchfield Hills] very Litchfield County," he concluded. "Haight is the oldest winery in the state, the June vineyards are gorgeous and it creates a beautiful ambiance for the weekend. It's an old Yankee tradition. And like the saying goes, if it's not broke, don't fix it."

*A Taste of the Litchfield Hills is to be held rain or shine June 26 from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. and June 27 from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Haight Vineyard, located at 29 Chesnut Hill Road in Litchfield. Adult admission is \$6; seniors, \$5; children under 12, free; food and beverage purchases are additional. Free parking is available on the winery grounds. For more information, call 860-567-4045, 800-577-WINE, or log on*

