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Finger Lakes Wines

Howard G. Goldberg

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The picturesque Finger Lakes region in central New York State is soaring into prominence in the international wine world. Its producers and vineyard managers owe this overdue recognition to riesling, a white grape whose versatile wines are new favorites across North America.

Wine specialists are seeing Finger Lakes rieslings become synonymous with standard-bearers from Germany, Alsace, Austria and, increasingly, Australia.



The verdant slopes encircling the key lakes, Seneca, Cayuga, Keuka and Canandaigua, are home to 96 of New York's 231 producers. The estates that cultivate riesling sell all they can make, and strive to plant more. Big upstate markets like Rochester, Syracuse, Buffalo and Albany buy much of it.

Riesling is found in dry, off-dry, sweet, still-wine, ice-wine and sparkling-wine styles. A visitors guide to wineries with dependable rieslings would highlight Atwater, Chateau LaFayette-Reneau, Dr. Konstantin Frank's Vinifera Wine Cellars, Fulkerson, Glenora, Heron Hill, Hosmer, Hunt Country, King Ferry (Treleaven), Lamoreaux Landing, Ravines, Red Newt, Sheldrake Point, Standing Stone, Swedish Hill, Thirsty Owl and Hermann J. Wiemer.

The winery hub is the 38-mile-long Seneca; the heights of the 19-mile-long Keuka startlingly resemble the Rhine's in Germany. The placid landscape is dotted with farms, grazing cattle and horses. At harvest time vineyards seen from distances resemble russet and golden patchwork quilts.

This cool-climate region's wine industry is the hottest it has been since the post-Civil War boom late in the 19th century. Its economic growth dates to passage of New York's Farm Winery Act in 1976, when the state had a mere 19 wineries. This legislation created incentives for economically depressed grape farmers dependent on native *Vitis labrusca*

grapes – Concord, Niagara, Catawba, Delaware and Diamond – to become producers whose subsequent prosperity would be nurtured by classic European grapes.

The so-called vinifera revolution that followed helped position New York as the fourth most important winegrowing state – behind California, Washington and Oregon – as gauged by the number of producers.

Since the lakes region is primarily white-wine country, good chardonnay and gewürztraminer can be found. Some minor grapes produce charming, even memorable, wines that could belong in France's low-priced vin de pay (country wine) category. They include Seyval blanc, Vidal blanc, vigneoles (formerly Ravat), Cayuga white and melody. A few successful reds like cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, merlot and syrah are taking hold.

Theoretical and practical grape-growing and winemaking knowledge and skills are offered by Cornell University's New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, in Geneva, on Seneca. In 2006, the New York wine industry opened its \$7.5 million educational headquarters, the New York Wine and Culinary Center, in Canandaigua. A spectrum of wines can be tasted there.



A case of savory whites would include Dr. Frank's best-selling rkatsiteli (er-kat-si-TEL-lee), made from a Russian grape, and Dr. Frank's sparkling wines; rieslings from Wiemer and LaFayette-Reneau; Lamoreaux Landing chardonnay; Dr. Frank's gewürztraminer; Lakewood white Catawba; Goose Watch Diamond; Atwater Vidal blanc; Red Newt White; and Glenora Seyval blanc. Wines vary by vintage. Prices are \$7 to \$50; many are less than \$20. The Lakewood white Catawba is \$7; Wiemer's late-harvest riesling reaches \$50.