

New York State (9) Dr Konstantin Frank, Finger Lakes



Dr Konstantin Frank is one of the most important figures in the development of the Finger Lakes wine region. His story is a remarkable one, too. He's most famous now for being the key figure in getting people to plant *Vitis vinifera* varieties in the Finger Lakes.



Born in 1899 into a wealthy ethnic German family in Ukraine, Frank became a noted agricultural engineer, and later in his career he earned a PhD.

Although his family were on the wrong side in the post-1917 revolution war when the communists took over, they lost their land but remained in their part of Ukraine, where Frank got a job renovating and managing a huge state-owned vineyard. Many of the challenges he faced were to prepare him well for what he was later to find in New York State.



Vinifera!

Frank replanted this vineyard with grafted vinifera vines, and famously developed a special plough to earth over the vines for the winter – winter cold was one of the viticultural challenges here. This saved a lot of labour. Then came the second world war, and Frank and his family had to flee the Nazis, then flee the Russians (as an ethnic German things wouldn't have ended well), and then at the end they managed to find their way to an American-occupied area. He made himself useful to the occupying American administration, which earned him the chance to emigrate to the USA. Eventually, the family resettled in New York.



Seneca lake soils

As soon as he could earn enough money, Frank headed to Geneva, in the Finger Lakes, where he attempted to get a job more suited to his professional skills than the menial jobs he'd been taking just to earn some money. The problem was that although he spoke a number of languages, English wasn't one of them. Frustratingly for Frank, he could only find low level agricultural work, even though he'd been running a sizeable agricultural college in Ukraine. But he was fortunate to meet Charles Fournier of the Urbana Wine Company. Fournier himself had an interesting background: he came to the USA in 1930 after being headhunted from his role as winemaker with Veuve Clicquot. Fournier recognized Frank's talents (in part because Frank could speak French and so finally found someone he could communicate with) and hired him.



Multiple trunks in case of winter damage

The partnership between Frank and Fournier was to prove pivotal in introducing vinifera into the region. At the time no one thought it would work, because of winter cold and disease pressure. But Frank had seen vinifera thrive in a similarly challenging environment in Ukraine. He was persistent and vocal, and eventually vinifera was planted, and it worked. He then commenced a vast project of experimentation, allocating increasing resources to vinifera trials. He also saved up enough money to buy his own property on Keuka lake, where he began more vinifera trials. Frank's obsession with vinifera and his dislike for hybrids eventually caused problems for his employers, who were making good money from hybrid wines. Eventually, in 1962 Frank left (some accounts say he was sacked, while others claim he left by choice) to focus on his own winery, then called Vinifera Wine Cellars.



Today, Vinifera is known by his name, Dr Konstantin Frank, and is one of the most important producers in the region. Since 1993 it has been run by Konstantin's grandson, Fred Frank, assisted by a fourth generation Frank, Meaghan. I visted with both.



‘He bought this property and 66 grape varieties were planted as an experiment,’ explains Fred Frank. Now, they are bit more focused, but do have some more unusual varieties like Rkatsiteli and Saperavi. They are beginning to focus a bit on sparkling, and have six different ones in their range. ‘Sparkling is the next thing for this region,’ says Fred. ‘Our juice chemistry off the press is almost identical to Champagne juice. Our climate is the closest to Champagne in the USA.’



Rkatsiteli with its unusual ovoid berries

The home vineyard is on the western side of Keuka lake, where the soils have a high shale content. 'Keuka lake is shallower with a higher elevation and rockier soils,' says Fred, 'but we also have vineyards on Seneca which has more of a moderating effect. It is an asset having multiple vineyard sites.'

Dr Konstantin Frank Blanc de Blancs 2013

100% Chardonnay, disgorged April 2018, dosage 8 g/litre. Bright and lively with a pithy edge to the fruit. Crisp, lemony and focused with a slight bitterness. This is really lively and pure. 89/100

Dr Konstantin Frank Blanc de Noirs 2013

95% Pinot Noir, 5% Pinot Meunier. 8 g/l. Fruity and expressive with cherry, lemons, pear and some grapefruit pith. Bright and juicy with nice precision and focus. Primary and taut. 88/100

Dr Konstantin Frank Brut Rosé 2013

95% Pinot Noir, 5% Pinot Meunier, with 8 g/l dosage, and some Pinot Noir still wine in the dosage. Crisp, pale and focused with good acidity. Very bright and juicy with keen acidity and nice precision. 89/100

Dr Konstantin Frank Brut 2013

Blend of the three main Champagne grapes. Lively, fresh and fruity with nice bright citrus fruit. Taut and herby with nice brightness. 88/100

Dr Konstantin Frank Dry Riesling 2016

Fresh and bright with open lemon, pear and tangerine notes. Supple, light and expressive. 88/100

Dr Konstantin Frank Gruner Veltliner 2016

Supple, fresh and bright with nice juiciness. There's some lemony character here. Delicate and showing some finesse, as well as a touch of white pepper. A light, transparent, expressive version. 89/100



Dr Konstantin Frank Eugenia Dry Riesling 2016

Dry Riesling from Keuka, vines planted in 1958 on rocky soils. Very tight and lemony with lovely crisp, focused, mineral lemon and lime notes. Pure and bright with high acidity. Very linear. 91/100

Dr Konstantin Frank Rkatsiteli 2017

Lemony, fresh and intense. Pure with nice stony, mineral undertones with subtle herby hints. It's not all about fruit: it seems stony, clean and bright with lovely purity. 91/100 (\$17)

Dr Konstantin Frank Amber Rkatsiteli 2016

15 days on skins ferment, plus 10 days post-ferment. (Two amphorae were imported from Italy and were used for the 2017, but this 2016 was done in barrel.) So lively and fresh with complex wax and nut characters as well as a bit of anise. Distinctive and nutty with lovely savouriness. 92/100

Dr Konstantin Frank Gewurztraminer 2016

Crisp, floral and bright with high acidity and some rose petal character. Perfumed and a bit jellyish with nice bright fruity flavours. A touch confected. 86/100

Dr Konstantin Frank Gewurztraminer 2017

Delicate, perfumed and crisp with nice lychee and Turkish delight notes. Supple and fresh with a lovely texture. Grapy, sweet finish. 89/100



Dr Konstantin Frank Old Vine Pinot Noir 2016

These cuttings came through quarantine at Beltsville, Maryland (one of the two USDA facilities) and had been sourced from France. Planted in 1958. Supple and quite elegant with delicate red cherry fruit with a hint of cedar and spice under the pure fruit. Soft, textured and easy with a hint of seriousness. Has nice purity of fruit. Fine grained finish. Very stylish in a lighter style. 91/100 (\$21)

Dr Konstantin Frank Blaufrankisch 2016

This is bright, supple and juicy with nice weight. Juicy with some raspberry and redcurrant fruit. This is quite elegant and fine with very nice supple, smooth fruit. Has real finesse and poise. So expressive. 91/100 (\$21)

Dr Konstantin Frank Cabernet Franc 2015

Supple and structured with juicy raspberry and black cherry fruit with some blackcurrant notes. Has some gravelly structure and good acidity. Nice depth and focus with lovely brightness. Grippy finish. Proper wine. 92/100 (\$22)

Dr Konstantin Frank Lena Reserve Red 2015

Barrel selection from the Keuka property, including Saperavi, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot. This is fleshy and bright with great concentration of blackcurrant and blackberry fruit. This has some structure and good acidity. Dense and primary with lovely brightness. Has potential. 93/100 (\$70)