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DRINK

A New Generation of Winemakers is Taking Finger Lakes Wines Beyond Riesling

by Carly Fisher — FEBRUARY 12, 2018



nce synonymous with overly sweet riesling, wineries in New York’s Finger Lakes region are branching out as a younger generation of winemakers produce a portfolio of chardonnay, cabernet franc, pinot noir, leMBERger and gewürztraminer. These aren’t the supermarket wines you might associate with the region; they’ve been deemed worthy of showcasing at New York City Michelin-starred restaurants like **The Modern**, **Faro** and **Le Bernadin**, plus hotspots around the country, like **Redbird** in Los Angeles, **District Winery** in Washington, D.C., and **Daisies** in Chicago.



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he says. “It’s one of the parent varieties to cabernet sauvignon, but it drinks like a spicier pinot noir. Lovely acidity, very refreshing and can take on a lot of character. It’s a compelling wine. Some people are still treating it in the style of a Bordeaux, trying to make it aged in oak; others are making it fresher [and] juicier, releasing it six to 12 months after it’s made with minimal oak treatment.”

Viniculture in the Finger Lakes evolved slowly. **Dr. Konstantin Frank** began experimental plantings of the first vinifera plants in the 1950s by, and went on to found **Vinifera Wine Cellars** (<http://www.drfrankwines.com/>), in 1962. Pioneers like Frank and **Hermann J. Wiemer** (<http://wiemer.com/>), who arrived in 1970, helped set the precedent for wineries to proliferate throughout the ‘80s and ‘90s. Tourism emerged through the establishment of wine trails, but otherwise professional interest in the fruits of the region had been largely ignored—until now, as a recent influx of younger winemakers starts to explore the potential of the robust farmlands with a modern approach.

O Leading the pack is cabernet franc, a Bordeaux varietal first planted in the 1980s and, like riesling, since proliferated due to its ability to thrive in the Finger Lakes’ cooler climate and survive a longer growing season. **Thomas Pastuszak**, wine director of **The Nomad Hotel** in New York and Los Angeles, and his wife **Jessica Brown**, ran with their passion for the varietal by launching their own cabernet franc under the wine label, **Terrassen**

(<http://www.gpswineco.com/producer/terrassen/>),—a sister project to his riesling label, **Empire Estate**—and is hedging his bets it might be the region’s next big thing.

“There’s no appellation in the U.S. that has really taken claim for cab franc, specifically,”

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“One of the big things to remember is that we’re a new region and we’re farmers. Remembering those two things helps understand a lot of things of how we perceive the potential in the Finger Lakes,” says **Christopher Bates**, a chef at **F.L.X. Table** (<https://flxtable.com/>), in Geneva and Master Sommelier who co-founded **Element Winer** (<http://elementwinery.com/>)y in Arkport, N.Y.

Part of what makes the Finger Lakes so fascinating to winegrowers is its unique microclimate and *terroir*. Its proximity to Seneca Lake—a deep basin that serves as an incubator and provides the land with warmth during winter and cools it during summer—offers growing conditions similar to Old World varietals in Burgundy and Mosel, Germany. The *terroir* is another selling point; to call it diverse is an understatement. Shale may be the mother rock of New York, but eroding soils brought down through Canada as a result of the Ice Age glacial movements mean land throughout the region can jump from a ravine rich with limestone, gravel or clay to pure shale down the road.

Riesling and cabernet franc might have been the best performers—hence their abundance in the region—but lesser-known varietals exist in the area as a result of decades of trial and error. The difference now is that these grapes are being turned into wines. While established wineries tend to grow their own grapes, many emerging winemakers are finding a more affordable way to enter the field by buying fruit from farmers who can grow grapes to spec, then producing wines off-site.

“In order to make wine, you need vines. To start all of that from scratch takes a lot of money and a lot of time,” Pastuszak says. “If you’re an established winery and have a lot of capital, you can do that. But for smaller folks like us, there’s an amazing community of farmers who are not winemakers. They grow amazing fruit, but don’t make a single wine. So, it’s a way to help farmers, but at the same time, for a project like Terrassen, we don’t have to spend gobs of money.”

Along with the introduction of other varietals, production methods are changing, too, which is reflective of trends happening across the wine world.



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“There is difference of style between the younger generation and older; the younger is letting the grape express itself more,” says co-owner **Stephanie Mira de Orduna** of **Microclimate Wine Bar** (<https://www.facebook.com/pg/MicroclimateWineBar>) in Geneva, N.Y. “They’re not using oak that will overpower the varieties, [they’re] just doing what the grape is telling them. It’s true for different styles of blends, like the Rhone style or Bordeaux. It’s very exciting because the fruit is very fresh. They are even taking risks, leaving the fruit on the vine a little longer than everybody else to get the maturity you’re looking for, and they’re willing to do this even with riesling.”

“I think what’s interesting about this region [is that] it’s still a place where the cost of land isn’t outrageous. So for young people with a dream, it’s still possible to do a winery here,” says **Tom Higgins**, who, with his wife, **Susan**, owns **Hands and Heart** (<https://heartandhandswine.com>), a small winery in Aurora, N.Y., with a limited portfolio of pinot noir and riesling. “There’s a certain amount of the new blood in the region, a little more focus in terms of varieties, and a limited portfolio compared to a large portfolio you’d see in the ‘80s and ‘90s.”

At Element, Bates focuses on varietals he’s passionate about, like pinot noir, syrah and leMBERGER. Syrah and chardonnay, he says, are both incredibly challenging because they require specific planting conditions—which he appreciates and speaks to his inner wine geek.

“One of the challenges we’ve always had is if something works, we tend to stick with it,” Bates says. “For a very long time, as a largely tourist-driven wine region, our goal was to make wines good or good enough. But our goal is now to make wines that are truly great and on a quality on the great wines in the world. There’s already a lot of people making great riesling, but I’m pretty sure that we can add a far larger, louder voice to the future of pinot noir or syrah or leMBERGER in the Finger Lakes than riesling.”

That voice is already making the rounds beyond state lines in places like Chicago, where general manager/wine director Keith Whitten of **Daisies** (<https://www.daisieschicago.com/>), peppers his beverage menu with selections from wineries like **Red Tail Ridge Winery** (<http://www.redtailridgewinery.com/>) and

Ravines Wine Cellar (<http://www.ravineswine.com/>). He says the restaurant's rustic Midwestern fare, like the lamb pasta dish, lends itself to the more delicate and elegant red wines of the region rather than something more full-bodied.

"When you hear of [winemakers] growing in these cold climates, people look at you like you're crazy, but France is cold, too," Whitten says. "Part of what we're doing at Daisies is revitalizing Midwestern cuisines and acquainting people with things they're not familiar with. With the wine program, we're trying to open up people's eyes to the regions that have been overlooked or not established in people's minds. And I think the Finger Lakes is definitely one of those regions."

Wineries To Watch

- **McGregor Winery** (<https://www.mcgregorwinery.com>) is among some of the older wineries implementing more exciting varietals. Their Black Russian Red features a unique blend of Russian varietals Saperavi and Sereksiya Charni.
- **Red Tail Ridge Winery** (<http://www.redtailridgewinery.com/>) features a number of varietals and blends, including *blaufränkisch* and teroldego, plus methods like spontaneous fermentation and skin fermentation.
- **Red Newt Cellars** (<http://rednewt.com/>) features a number of single varietals like gewürztraminer, merlot and pinot gris, plus occasional experimental wines in its laboratory series.



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