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CASE STUDY

New York Uncorked

By TOBY CECCHINI

The Finger Lakes in western [New York State](#) has always seemed to me the most exciting and legitimate wine region in the East. Ethereally gorgeous, magnificently unspoiled, bursting with idiosyncratic wines and just a five hour drive from [New York City](#), it should be the golden destination for East Coast wine lovers. And yet it remains largely ignored by tourists and oeno-freaks alike.

The 11 lakes themselves are breathtaking, fanning across a rectangle loosely demarcated by Ithaca, Syracuse and Rochester, but they make direct east-west travel difficult. Locals will often tell you, pointing to a town just across the lake, that they haven't been there in years. This natural inaccessibility safeguards the region's pristine remoteness, with main streets that seem set in amber and the only franchises the ferociously competing ice creameries.

That the area has always been an ideal place to grow grapes is clear from the wild vines that proliferate everywhere, embracing Civil War tombstones and climbing the shale alongside the region's ubiquitous waterfalls. The large wineries that thrived in the 19th century, however, were gradually snuffed out after Prohibition, leaving only stolid Victorian warehouses scattered along the lakeside ports.

And that's how it remained — the Finger Lakes was a viticultural backwater, known only for jug and kosher wines, until Dr. Konstantin Frank, a pioneering German-Russian oenologist, immigrated here in the 1950's. He began planting vinifera grapes from [Europe](#), a species that comprises most of the wines we routinely drink, like chardonnay and merlot; of these, riesling seems to take most felicitously to the area. Though vinifera vines are generally acknowledged to make the best wine, they typically cannot survive the region's brutal winters. The larger lakes, however, some nearly 40 miles long, act as heat sinks, creating their own microclimates that both buffer against severe winters and extend the short growing season, allowing coddled vines to flourish.

Today there are more than 100 wineries in production, most of them family-run, and at least 20 of those quite worthwhile, where an intrepid sniff-and-swirler can turn up strikingly accomplished wines in every category. Aside from the front-runner, riesling, early-ripening varieties like cabernet franc and merlot are turning cartwheels in some vintners' hands. But tasting what some of these same vintners are doing with labrusca, an American native grape species, as well as hybrids can be absolutely eye-opening. Wine snobs may not take them as seriously, but I had lyrical wines from such varieties as Cayuga, Niagara and vigneoles that could stand proudly in an international field.

In fact, the visitor's real task is keeping all of the varieties straight, which can leave even the most assiduous taster gasping. Where most wine regions specialize in a few grapes, the Finger Lakes' catholicity knows no

bounds. I counted 29 varietals, from which there may be sweet and dry versions, alongside rosés, dessert wines, sparkling wines, ports, brandy and grappa. And that's not even counting esoterics like meads and ciders.

A good place to start tasting is on Route 414 along Seneca Lake, where some of the more vaunted newer vintners are clustered in an area facetiously known as the "banana belt," for the fine fruit it has produced since Colonial times. Apple, cherry and peach orchards share space along the roadside, where, if you blink, you could miss the tiny shack that is Damiani Wine Cellars' tasting room. The owners, Lou Damiani and Phil Davis, are pinot noir specialists whose smoky, sensuous wines are templates for the kind of rich reds the area can produce in the best hands.

A few beats up the road, the sign outside the semihidden Shalestone Vineyards proclaims forebodingly, "Red Is All We Do," to keep sweet-seeking carousers at bay. Inside, Rob Thomas, the owner and winemaker, pours and chats with the amiable ease of a man who loves his calling. And with good reason. His polished wines are what I would uncork to silence doubters of this region: merlot with a spot-on perfume of green olives, cabernet franc lush with berry fruits. Just a few minutes away, you can sample the complex Burgundian-style pinot noir at the tidy Silver Thread Vineyard owned by the former wine writer Richard Figiel.

But don't pass by the stalwarts: Dr. Frank, Lamoreaux Landing and Hermann J. Wiemer (whose riesling was named the best wine last month in the New York Wine and Food Classic) are still making exemplary wines. Lamoreaux's Riesling Ice Wine, along with Anthony Road's astounding Trockenbeeren, in particular, are two world-class dessert wines.

Until recently, trying to eat well in the area had been a minefield from which the local coffee shops had always been the safest foxholes. But a welcome influx of talented, down-to-earth cooks has finally found a foothold. The Austrian chef Dano Hutnik and his wife, Karen Gilman, recently opened Dano's Heuriger on Seneca in Lodi, a modern version of a Viennese wine garden. Here you can pair a local glass with house-made spreads or tuck into a heartier dish of braised pork roast. In Hector, Scott Signori and his wife, Jessica, turned a roadside vegetable stand into the Stonecat Cafe by throwing down card tables and plastic chairs and firing up the smokers. Signori has yet to meet a comestible he won't smoke or pickle. If it's finery you're after, head to Suzanne Fine Regional Cuisine, where the chef Suzanne Stack turns out local and organic dishes in a former genteel farmhouse. Her wine list is effectively a cheat sheet of the better Finger Lakes producers.

When the moment arrives for a break from the pleasant labor of unknotting the wine-and-food scene, there may not be a more idyllic place to kick back. With endless trails through prairies, and gorges with waterfalls around every turn, the hiking and bicycling are as much a lure as the tasting rooms. Happily, amid the bare-bones motels and saccharine B&B's, urbane refuges have also opened their doors. The New Jersey-based designers Victoria and Richard MacKenzie-Childs have recently outfitted their Georgian-style homestead in King Ferry for guests. In the impossibly quaint town of

Aurora, on the shore of Cayuga Lake, sits the impressively renovated Aurora Inn, an 1833 Federal-style grand hotel. Here you can borrow a kayak or canoe for an outing or just retire to one of the Adirondack chairs on the huge lawn.

Despite the recognition that wine has started to bring to these sleepy farm communities, oenophiles still ask,

What's up with the Finger Lakes? If the wines are so good, why do we never see them? The answer is simple: volume. As Richard Figiel explains, "The best plots are those close to the lakes, and there is very little great fruit to go around." That means that most vintners' entire stock gets bought up directly in the tasting rooms. For adventurous wine hounds, however, that just sweetens the pot, making a pilgrimage to this bucolic corner of the state a fortunate necessity.

Essentials: Finger Lakes, N.Y.

GETTING THERE: The closest airport to the region is Ithaca Tompkins Regional (about one hour from the main winemaking area); U.S. Airways flies there from La Guardia. Or you can drive from New York City (about five hours).

HOTELS: Aurora Inn 391 Main Street, Aurora; (315)364-8888; doubles from \$225. Victoria & Richard Home Again 1671 Route 90, King Ferry; (315)364-8615; doubles from \$125.

WINERIES: Anthony Road Wine Company 1020 Anthony Road, Penn Yan; (800)559-2182. Damiani Wine Cellars 5435 Route 414, Hector; (607)546-5557. Dr. Konstantin Frank Vinifera Wine Cellars 9749 Middle Road, Hammondsport; (800)320-0735. Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard 3962 Route 14, Dundee; (800)371-7971. Lamoreaux Landing Wine Cellars 9224 Route 414, Lodi; (607)582-6011. Shalestone Vineyards 9681 Route 414, Lodi; (607)582-6600. Silver Thread Vineyard 1401 Caywood Road, Lodi; (607)582-6116.

RESTAURANTS, CAFES AND BARS: Dano's Heuriger on Seneca 9564 Route 414, Lodi; (607)582-7555; entrees \$11-\$20. Dorie's Great old-fashioned soda fountain. 283 Main Street, Aurora; (315)364-8818. Rongovian Embassy to the U.S.A. A wonderfully scruffy bar. 1 West Main Street, Trumansburg; (607)387-3334. Stonecat Cafe 5315 Route 414, Hector; (607)546-5000; entrees \$15-\$29. Suzanne Fine Regional Cuisine 9013 Route 414, Lodi; (607)582-7545; entrees \$19-\$33.

SHOPS: Caywood Antiques Real finds from family-farm sell-offs. 1525 Caywood Road, Lodi; (607)582-6100. Grove The gallery represents local modern artists and furniture designers. 347 Main Street, Aurora; (315)364-7472.

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