

Finger Lakes vineyard



A wine tasting at Finger Lakes

FINGER LAKES, N.Y.: THE NEW WINE COUNTRY?

Finger Lakes wines ready for judging



IMAGES/COURTESY OF FINGER LAKES WINE COUNTRY

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Wines from the Finger Lakes region of New York may be uncommon on Atlanta restaurant wine lists and store shelves, but that shouldn't be taken as a sign that the wines aren't worth your attention. Quite the opposite is true: The Finger Lakes region produces fabulous wines worth seeking out. Best of all, these high-quality wines are typically priced lower than equivalent wines from other wine-producing regions around the world. (At least until word spreads and demand grows.)

This past fall, I spent several days in the Finger Lakes region—my first visit, but most definitely not my last—tasting wines at dozens of wineries. Glass after glass, what I discovered was impressive consistency. While the region is gaining notoriety for its riesling, planted on the sloping hillsides is a wide range of varietals including native grapes (like concord, Niagara, Delaware and catawba), hybrids (like Cayuga, chancelor, baco noir and traminette) and viniferas (such as cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay and pinot noir). “The Finger Lakes region is the most viticulturally diverse area in the world,” says Lisa Hallgren, who co-owns Ravines Wine Cellars with her husband and winemaker Morten. “We grow so many different grapes and make so many different styles of wine.”

Located in western New York, the Finger Lakes region is approximately the size of Vermont and home to more than 100

DRINKING ESSENTIALS

WHERE TO GO

The Finger Lakes region, one of our nation's largest wine-producing areas, boasts more than 100 wineries along several routes and paths:

- Canandaigua Wine Trail: 877-FUN-IN-NY. www.canandaiguawinetrail.com
- Cayuga Wine Trail: 800-684-5217. www.cayugawinetrail.com
- Keuka Lake Wine Trail: 800-440-4898. www.keukawinetrail.com
- Livingston County's Little Finger Lakes “Wine Path”: www.FingerLakesWest.com
- Seneca Lake Wine Trail: 877-536-2717. www.senecalakewine.com

WHAT TO EAT

Local culinary treasures include bread made by the monks at Abbey of the Genesee, Hartmann's old world sausages and Nunda mustard. Stock up at Wegman's, the grocery store that inspired the founders of Whole Foods.

WHERE TO STAY

Belhurst: 315-781-0201. www.belhurst.com.
The Inn at Glenora Wine Cellars: 800-243-5513. www.glenora.com.

WHEN TO GO

Any time, but consider the Finger Lakes Wine Festival, set for July 17–19, 2009.

MORE INFORMATION

- **Finger Lakes Wine Country Tourism Marketing Association, Inc.**
800-813-2958
www.FingerLakesWineCountry.com
- **Finger Lakes Tourism Alliance**
800-548-4386
www.FingerLakes.org

wineries. It's named for 11 narrow lakes that stretch out like fingers across the area, created when glaciers receded. Ranging from three to 40 miles long and 30 to 632 feet deep, the lakes bear Native American names: Conesus, Hemlock, Canadice, Honoye, Canandaigua, Keuka, Seneca, Cayuga, Owasco, Skaneateles and Otisco. The lakes contribute more than breathtaking beauty to the region: They help grapevines thrive.

“The Finger Lakes are deeper than the Great Lakes and usually don't freeze,” says Bob Madill, owner of Sheldrake Point Vineyards and Chair of the Finger Lakes Wine Alliance. “And to the north is Lake Ontario. The lakes relieve cold pressure, and their effect on the microclimate is like a huge bathtub, mitigating the very severe weather that can happen in winter.” Additional factors like shale soil and steep slopes encourage drainage for healthy vines.

Cold winters and a short growing season (similar to Germany's Rhine area) have tangible benefits: Cool climate wines tend to have more fresh fruit flavors and a stronger acidic backbone than their warm climate counterparts—characteristics that boost food-friendliness. “The Finger Lakes is the coolest major winemaking region in the country,” says Art Hunt, owner of Hunt Country Vineyards. “The cool

climate gives us outstanding, intense fruit flavors. We have sunny and warm days in the fall, but very cool nights that somehow concentrate the fruit flavors in the berries more. That's why Finger Lakes wineries consistently win gold medals.”

In addition to homegrown talent (such as winemaker Barry Tortolon at Rooster Hill Vineyards, a Finger Lakes native), the region is attracting skilled winemakers from around the world. Winemaker Morten Hallgren trained in France. Nancy Irelan, owner of Red Tail Ridge Winery, previously worked as vice president of viticulture and enology research and development for Ernest & Julio Gallo Winery in California. Why choose the Finger Lakes? “Just look around,” says Irelan, sweeping her arm across the spectacular scenery in front of her.

Initially, winemakers had to fight against the notion that the region produced only grapey-sweet wines, but attitudes are changing. “We're now considered the best place in the country, if not the world, to make riesling,” says Hunt. “And our cabernet franc keeps getting better with age.”

If you can't quench your thirst for Finger Lakes wines in Atlanta, then visit the region to explore the wineries. Whether you're a wine novice or an expert, it's well worth a trip. **SP**