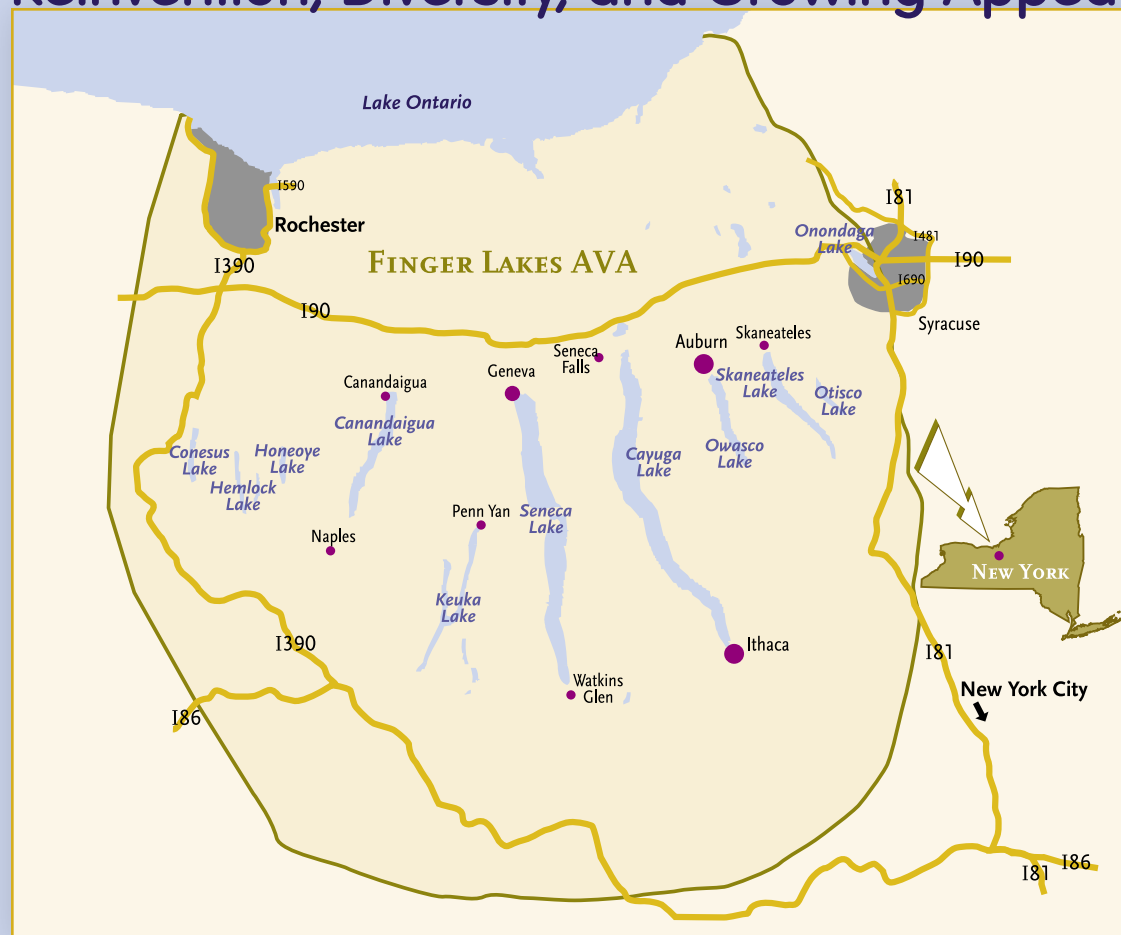


The Finger Lakes:

Reinvention, Diversity, and Growing Appeal



Opposite page: Sheldrake Point Vineyard (top); Riesling vines along Seneca Lake (bottom left); Lamoreaux Landing (bottom center); Dr. Konstantin Frank Vinifera Wine Cellars vineyard on Keuka Lake (bottom right).

PATRICIA SAVOIE

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High-quality wine grapes shouldn't grow in the heart of New York state's snowbelt, where the continental climate provides frigid, snow-laden winters and short, humid summers. But they do grow in the Finger Lakes region. With about 11,000 acres under vine, the Finger Lakes American Viticultural Area is the largest AVA in New York state and the second-largest U.S. wine-producing area after California.

The four major lakes—long and narrow, resembling the fingers on a giant hand—are what make grape growing possible. Withdrawal of the glacier at the end of the Ice Age 10,000 years ago gouged out the 435-foot depth of Cayuga and the 600 feet of Seneca, creating two of the deepest lakes in the United States. Their climatic influence is to temper extremes; in spring, when late frosts can kill the new buds and doom the crop, the cold lakes actually delay the budding of



the vines, protecting them from the frost. During summer, the lakes store heat, reducing the difference between day- and nighttime temperatures and thus lengthening the growing season. Just before harvest, their stored warmth helps ward off damaging frosts. And in winter, they bring heavy, wet lake-effect snow to blanket and protect the vines.

Unfortunately, this viticultural system is not foolproof. In both 2004 and 2005, extremely cold winters destroyed many of the vines. In terms of overall quality, however, the 2004, 2005, and 2006 vintages are all considered good, with 2006 the best, based on its ideal levels of rainfall and average daily temperatures below 80°F.



Dr. Konstantin Frank and Charles Fournier (above left); Dr. Frank with the “dean of American winemakers,” André Tchelistcheff (top center); New York Gov. Hugh Carey presenting an award to Dr. Frank (above center).

Finger Lakes Wine History

Although wine has been made here since the late 1800s, only a handful of wineries survived Prohibition. One of the founding fathers of modern Finger Lakes wine was Charles Fournier, a French vintner who arrived in the 1950s. His mission at Gold Seal Winery was to upgrade the sparkling wines being made with native grapes, and his introduction of French-American hybrids, which combined cold tolerance with the desirable taste profiles of European wines, brought a resurgence in wine production.

As most students of wine know, it was Dr. Konstantin Frank, a Ukrainian immigrant, who championed *Vitis vinifera* grapes in the eastern United States in the 1950s. Before that, it was generally believed that these varieties could not survive the harsh winters. But Frank grafted the vines onto the hardy, native rootstock, planted vineyards, and built a winery on the western

shores of Keuka Lake. The first vintage produced by his Vinifera Wine Cellars was 1962.

By 2000, there were 61 Finger Lakes wineries. Today, according to the New York Wine & Grape Foundation, there are 105, most located along the shores of Cayuga, Seneca, and Keuka lakes. With the exception of a few large producers—and Constellation Brands, based in Hammondsport, N.Y.—most producers are small, due in large part to a 1976 state law that encouraged the establishment of farm-based wineries.

Finger Lakes Grape Varieties

The recent upsurge in the number of wineries means that most are relatively new, and many vintners are still experimenting to find the grape varieties that work best in their microclimates. Although the native Concord, Catawba, Seyval Blanc, and Baco Noir varieties are still grown, more producers are now making wines from *vinifera* grapes, primarily Riesling, Chardonnay,

Photos courtesy of Dr. Konstantin Frank Vinifera Wine Cellars



FINGER LAKES GRAPE VARIETIES

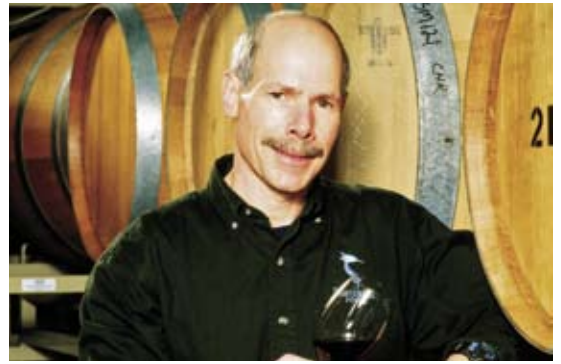
American Native Varieties: *Vitis labrusca* grapes are popular with Finger Lakes wine producers because they are hardy and can withstand the cold winters. The most common in the region are Concord, Catawba, and Delaware. Many of these varieties have high acidity and concentrated sweetness, and they're known for a "foxy" character—a wild-grape aroma that probably comes from an ester, methyl anthranilate.

French-American Hybrids: These grape varieties, combining European style with American vine hardiness, were developed by French viticulturists in the 19th century. Baco Noir and Chancellor are the most planted red grapes; Seyval Blanc and Vidal are the most popular whites.

European Varieties: Several European *Vitis vinifera* grapes are grown throughout the Finger Lakes AVA. Riesling, Chardonnay, Merlot, and Pinot Noir have been most successful, but Cabernet Franc and Pinot Gris are now doing well.

Cabernet Franc, and Pinot Noir. In fact, between 2001 and 2006, planted acreage was up 46% for Cabernet Franc and 9% for Pinot Noir. While native grapes still represent the largest crops, according to the 2006 National Agricultural Statistics Service and New York Fruit Tree and Vineyard survey, their planted acreage is generally declining compared to the *vinifera* varieties.

Cayuga Lake (top left); Hermann J. Wiemer vineyard (bottom left); Dr. Konstantin Frank Pinot Noir grapes (top right); Sheldrake Point Pinot Noir vines (middle right); Red Newt vineyard workers picking Chardonnay (above).



Willy and Frederick Frank (left); Bob Madill (above).

HOW THE RIESLINGS AGE

A vertical tasting of Dr. Konstantin Frank Dry Riesling was conducted in March 2008 with the Wine Media Guild of New York. (Remember that the regular bottling of this wine retails for \$18.) My notes are listed below.

- 2006** Apple, peach, citrus with herbal notes.
- 2005** Fruit-dominant, with sweet lime and exotic floral notes. Reserve: Spice notes and a bit richer taste than the regular bottling.
- 2003** Tart, crisp acidity; a little grassy. Green apples and grapefruit on the nose, with classic petrol-diesel notes starting to show. Substantial in the mouth. Refreshing.
- 2002** More pronounced petrol-diesel notes. Fruit more integrated.
- 2001** Reserve: More pronounced minerality, along with petrol-diesel notes.
- 2000** Very fresh, with a bit more sweetness. Fruit nicely integrated.
- 1999** Distinct mineral and petrol notes.
- 1998** Some oxidation.
- 1996** Fine balance. Nice petrol on the nose.
- 1995** Perfect. Subtle, honeyed nose. Rich, with good acidity. A crowd-pleaser.
- 1988** Lovely petrol notes. Some described it as having an off, caramelized aroma.
- 1987** Higher sugar level. Earthy.
- 1985** Oxidized, with acidity predominating.
- 1964** Oxidized. Dark, burnt color, but still an interesting wine.

Despite the appellation's growing reputation for quality, most Finger Lakes wines don't make it past the state's borders: first, because most of them are snapped up by locals, and second, because many people, including sommeliers and wine buyers, are still unfamiliar with them. Since Riesling is considered the star of the region, it's the wine found most often on lists outside New York. Only 100,000 cases of Riesling are produced annually in New York (by comparison, Washington's Chateau Ste. Michelle alone makes more than 700,000 cases a year), but it is among the fastest-growing varieties in terms of acreage, which increased by 60% between 2001 and 2006. The largest producers, Dr. Konstantin Frank (at 4,500 annual cases of dry Riesling) and Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard (3,100 cases), now boast long lists of gold medals from various competitions. Chateau LaFayette Reneau, Standing Stone Vineyards, and Treleven Wines are other important Riesling makers.

Says Frederick Frank, son of Willy and grandson of Konstantin, "As our region matures, we are seeing more grape specialization. To be successful on a national basis, you have to produce a wine that is consistent. Riesling is consistent here." Finger Lakes Rieslings generally feature some residual sugar to balance their gripping acidity. They pair well with a broad range of foods: fish, shellfish, poultry, foie gras, pastas with cream sauces, spicy foods, Asian dishes, and creamy cheeses.

Promise of the Region

Bob Madill, chair of the Finger Lakes Wine Alliance and a partner in Sheldrake Point Vineyard, feels that "aromatic white wines and rosé represent the strong suit for the Finger Lakes." This category certainly includes Riesling, but

Photo courtesy of Dr. Konstantin Frank Vitisfera Wine Cellars (left)

KEY PRODUCERS

KEUKA LAKE

Dr. Konstantin Frank Vinifera Wine Cellars:

For more than 45 years, the Franks have produced award-winning whites and reds. Their best bottlings are their Rieslings, Gewürztraminer, and Rkatsiteli, a red wine from a Russian grape. Sparkling wines, including a Blanc de Blancs and Blanc de Noirs, have recently become a focus.

McGregor Vineyard: This producer offers several unusual wines. Its Cayuga White, Sunflower White (Cayuga, Seyval, and Diamond), and Thistle Blush (Rosette and Ives) all have some sweetness, balanced by fresh acidity. Of its reds, the Black Russian may be one of the most unusual wines made today—a blend of two Eastern European grapes, Saperavi and Sereksiya Carni, both grown on the estate. It's full-bodied with plenty of acidity.

SENECA LAKE

Lamoreaux Landing Wine Cellars: All grapes are grown on the estate, where some of the vines are more than 100 years old. The brut sparkling wine (Pinot Noir and Chardonnay) is luscious and rich. Both the Chardonnay and the Reserve Chardonnay are rich and full-flavored. The 2007 Gewürztraminer is semi-dry, with citrus and ginger notes, while the Vidal icewine displays excellent balance of fruit and acidity.

Red Newt Cellars: The Salamander White, blending Pinot Gris, Seyval, and Vidal, is refreshing and dry. Red Newt also makes a nice Syrah—a grape that is beginning to show up in more vineyards here. The Tierce Dry Riesling, made by winemakers from three Seneca Lake vineyards (Anthony Road, Fox Run, and Red Newt), shows wonderful balance and minerality, accompanied by petrol notes in the older vintages.

Standing Stone Vineyards: Its 2006 Riesling comes from a vineyard that was planted by Charles Fournier more than 35 years ago. With around 2% residual sugar, it shows peach, spicy green-apple, and floral notes in its youth and has great potential.

Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard: The botrytised 2003 Select Late Harvest displays floral and honey aromas, with enough acidity to offset its 13% residual sugar.

CAYUGA LAKE

Sheldrake Point Vineyard: This producer makes mainly *vinifera*-based wines. Its Gewürztraminer is a classic, with litchi and white-flower aromas. Of its reds, the Cabernet Francs and the dry Gamay are well made. An icewine from Cabernet Franc is concentrated and full of fig and prune flavors.



Hermann J. Wiemer winery.

IF YOU VISIT

Dr. Konstantin Frank Vinifera Wine Cellars
9749 Middle Road
Hammondsport,
NY 14840
(607) 868-4884
www.drfrankwines.com

Chateau LaFayette Reneau
Route 414
Hector, NY 14841
(607) 546-2062
www.clrwine.com

Lamoreaux Landing Wine Cellars
9224 Route 414
Lodi, NY 14860
(607) 582-6011
www.lamoreauxwine.com

McGregor Vineyard
5503 Dutch St.
Dundee, NY 14837
(607) 292-3999
www.mcgregorwinery.com

Red Newt Cellars
3675 Tichenor Road
Hector, NY 14841
(607) 546-4100
www.rednewt.com

Sheldrake Point Vineyard
7448 County Road #153
Ovid, NY 14521
(607) 532-9401
www.sheldrakepoint.com

Standing Stone Vineyards
9934 Route 414
Hector, NY 14841
(800) 803-7135
www.standingstonewines.com

Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard
3962 Route 14
Dundee, NY 14837
(607) 243-7971
www.wiemer.com



also Gewürztraminer (now with 75 acres planted), Pinot Gris, and Pinot Blanc. Madill says these wines have been consistent over several vintages, meaning that “the quality of the wine has generally been better than just acceptable across most of the Finger Lakes producers, with a character that reflects the vintage. The wines tend to retain their essential fruit and freshness.” Gewürztraminers are particularly attractive, offering notes of roses, litchi nuts, and spices. Hermann Wiemer is the largest producer, but Lamoreaux Landing and Dr. Konstantin Frank make outstanding examples as well.

Reds are more challenging, since the American market is generally used to ripe, jammy, soft, alcoholic wines. Finger Lakes reds are cool-climate wines, more European in style, with dark red fruit, fresh acidity, and medium body. “It’s not that our Cabernet Francs, Pinots, and Lemberger wines are not quality,” says Madill, “it’s that they have less appeal for consumers who treat wine as an aperitif rather than as a food accompaniment. The more the consumer begins to understand and enjoy wine with food, the more opportunity we in the Finger Lakes will have to present our wines.” 🍷



FINGER LAKES AVAS

Finger Lakes AVA: Recognized in 1987, the main AVA encompasses an area of 4,000 square miles and 11,000 acres of vines. Comprising the four main lakes—Canandaigua, Keuka, Seneca, and Cayuga—this is New York’s largest wine-growing region, home to 102 operating wineries. Average precipitation is between 35 and 38 inches, and the deep soil (at least 30 inches) provides good drainage. The bedrock below the vineyards varies from calcareous to non-calcareous shale.

Seneca Lake AVA: At a maximum depth of 600 feet, Seneca is the deepest of the Finger Lakes. Grapes can be grown around the shores because the 35-mile-long body of water rarely freezes. The Seneca Lake AVA, recognized in 2003, encompasses 204,600 acres, with 3,700 acres under vine and 52 wineries. Best known for Riesling, it produces a range of other wines that are beginning to earn international recognition.

Cayuga Lake AVA: This AVA, established in 1988, hugs the shores of the 40-mile-long lake and includes portions of Cayuga, Seneca, and Tompkins counties. There are 24 wineries, whose vineyards are planted mainly in the shale soils of the hillsides, up to 800 feet, on the western side of the lake.

Photos courtesy of Dr. Konstantin Frank Vinifera Wine Cellars (far left)