

The Finger Lakes - New York's secret wine region

25 Sep 2007 by Jancis Robinson/ET
~~See also more [Finger Lakes](#) on New York wines.~~

A recent trip to a part of the world where Hillary Clinton is regarded as a saviour and "a true missionary" was an eye-opener in many a sense.

The Finger Lakes in Central New York state are a bucolic playground of boats, vines, rolling hills and a landscape that looks little changed since the late 18th century when the colonisers finally managed to wrest this pretty region from the native Iroquois. Two things strike the visitor interested in wine: firstly the exceptional quality of the Rieslings made there (sweet and, especially, dry), and secondly how little they seem to be appreciated, or even known, in the city that bears the state's name. Although the Finger Lakes are little more than three hours' drive away from Manhattan, wine producers there seem almost fatally daunted by the prospect of trying to persuade New York's sommeliers, regarded as impossibly sophisticated by their exposure to the finest wines of the world, of the charms of their wines.

Not so Senator Clinton. Determined to regenerate the depopulated agricultural heartland of her state, which has experienced America's lowest growth rate over the last 10 years, she has made New York Farm Day, an annual feast in Washington DC hosted by her and designed to show off New York's finest foods and wines, one of the hottest tickets for America's lawmakers and top political aides. It was in an announcement about this year's event held earlier this month that the president of the New York Wine & Grape Foundation described Senator Clinton as "a true missionary for New York agriculture, including the grape and wine industry". And this is far from the only initiative by which she has earned the industry's respect and affection.

Grapes are even more important than wine in New York state, which lags far behind California and even behind Washington (the state) in terms of volume of wine produced but is America's prime source of grapes for jelly, jam and juice - typically native purple Concord grapes distinguished by a powerfully musky, 'foxy' flavour that is a long way from wine as most of us know it - made from vine varieties of European origin.

Since the 1960s, however, more and more European vinifera vines have been planted in the Finger Lakes, New York's most important wine region by far (Hudson River, Long Island and the new Niagara Escarpment are much smaller; Lake Erie is principally for hybrid and native grapes rather than wine). The pale undersides of the thick, round Concord leaves make it easy to spot the Concord vines with their white crests just like the lakes. Some of the vineyards look scarcely tended.

But producers such as Fox Run, Heron Hill, Hunt Country, Red Newt, Treleaven and the old-timer Hermann J Wiemer, who has just passed on the baton to his young winemaker Fred Merwarth, are making wines from conventional European vinifera grapes that can well stand comparison with international archetypes. With Arctic winters, the Finger Lakes is still essentially white wine country. In fact it is only the moderating influence of Lake Ontario to the north and the region's exceptionally deep, heat-storing lakes that give growers here enough frost-free days to ripen grapes at all. Vines are planted on the lakeside slopes so as to minimise the effects of such frosts as there are.

Fashion and global warming have helped to swell the ranks of Finger Lakes wine producers as never before in recent years, with the total number of wineries approaching 200, many of them tiny operations but virtually all of them heavily dependent on the vast numbers of tourists that can be relied upon this close to Niagara Falls. Weekend visitors to the cluster of universities such as Cornell and Syracuse help too.

The Finger Lakes wine business has limped along thanks to the crutch of being able to sell at the farm gate about two-thirds of all wine made. Indeed wineries often deliberately construct tasting rooms on the tortuous lakeside tourist trails even though they may be far from their centre of operations. But the demands of the average tourist have been relatively low. If the industry is to grow and gain international recognition (national recognition would be nice too), it has to set its sights higher than sweetened-up juice from hybrid vines.

One of the more outspoken winemakers here, Canadian-Hungarian Thomas Laszlo of Heron Hill, whose dry Riesling 2002 won best white of the San Francisco Wine Show in 2004, declares that all Finger Lakes vines that are not Riesling

should simply be pulled out and replaced by The Noble One. He certainly fashions some of the most ambitiously full bodied, dry and age-worthy examples - not unlike some of Germany's best modern dry Rieslings.

Laszlo is already rubbing his hands in glee over global warming's effect on German vineyards, hoping that this will signal a new interest in the Finger Lakes as it is rather cooler than any of Germany's wine regions - certainly in the winters which are so cold that many vinifera vines have to be painstakingly banked up against what can be a fatal freeze. In 2003 so many cold-sensitive Chardonnay vines were killed in the Finger Lakes that many growers replanted with the hardier Riesling, much to Laszlo's delight. But all Finger Lakes wine production is on a much smaller scale than the other American redoubt of this fashionable variety, so that while Washington state Riesling may sell for \$800 a ton, Finger Lakes prices are likely to be double this.

Nevertheless, Finger Lakes wines are as inexpensive as one would expect of such a humble region, with Fox Run's price tag of \$30 for their dry Riesling, which bears an uncanny resemblance to a well made Clare Valley Riesling from Australia, being seen as greedy by locals. Heron Hill still charges only around \$18 for their admirable dry Riesling from the difficult 2004 vintage.

Thanks to climate change, the Finger Lakes may yet become a red wine producing centre too. Pinot Noir is likely to shine here but one of the single best wines I tasted was a Cabernet Franc 2005. Grown by top local grower Jim Hazlitt, it was vinified by Dave Whiting of Red Newt Cellars and Bistro, whose restaurateur wife Deb has been regarded locally as the Finger Lakes' chief culinary ambassador.

A significant recent addition to the region however is the New York Wine & Culinary Center in Canandaigua, a handsome small town of broad streets and substantial houses selling at bargain prices. Canandaigua was previously famous in the wine world as the headquarters of the eponymous wine company that has since outgrown its kosher winemaking roots in New York to become the world's biggest wine company Constellation with subsidiaries such as Robert Mondavi of California and Hardys of Australia. The Center with its wine and cooking classes also has a chef, Daniel Martello, whose expertise was not trumped on my recent two-week tour of the US until I reached Thomas Keller's French Laundry in Yountville.

It would seem that the New York Wine & Grape Foundation finds New York's restaurant owners less intimidating than their wine waiters. Next month 26 leading New York restaurateurs have been persuaded to feature New York wines and foods, perhaps with a nudge from Hillary. For more details see www.newyorkwinesanddines.org.

Some exceptional Finger Lakes wines:

Fox Run Vineyards, Reserve Riesling 2005
Heron Hill, Riesling Reserve 2002, 2004 and 2005 (dry)
Heron Hill, Late Harvest Riesling 2002 (sweet)
King Ferry Winery, Treleavan Chardonnay 2005
Red Newt Cellars Cabernet Franc 2005
Hermann J Wiemer Dry Riesling 2005

For (rare) retail stockists, see www.winesearcher.com. See also tasting notes on more New York wines.