

Finger Lakes Wine Country

BY ROB TEREK

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Wineries

You will find great variety in the wines of the Finger Lakes. Local varietals such as Vidal Blanc or Seyval Blanc are grown, as are the more prominent popular varietals such as Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc. But the premier grape here is the world-class Riesling, popularized by influential winemakers such as Dr. Konstantin Frank and Hermann Wiemer. Many of the wineries make some red wine, but only mavericks like Steve Shaw are making it well.

The region has been known for sweet wines - mentions of residual sugar are common here and you may be asked if you like "sweet" or "dry" wines. Winemakers highlighted in this story are working hard to overcome the reputation and show that the region is capable of much more. On the opposite end, party stops like Hazliit, which boasts a legacy of over 150 years of viticulture but is better known for its Red Cat mascot, unfortunately cater to busloads of young drinkers with party girl wine pourers and "pre-packaged gelatin shots."

Almost every vineyard has a good Riesling, but one of the best producers is **Hermann J. Wiemer**. Of German descent, Hermann himself spent multiple harvests inspecting various vineyard plots before he settled on his current holdings, which he considers to have the perfect climate and terroir for Riesling grapes. His Rieslings have a great peachy, pear and apricot nose, followed by a nice clean minerality usually found in German bottlings. A Dry Riesling from 2007 had great acidity and was outstanding. The 2007 Gewürztraminer was just as good, dry and floral, while the 2003 Chardonnay Reserve was very aromatic, unusual for this much-abused grape. In addition, Oskar Bynke, the winery manager, now helps Hermann release excellent sparkling and dessert wines as well. We tasted a Blanc de Blanc Noir 2003, which was good and richer than expected, and a just bottled Cuvee Brut 2006, which was terrific.



The next stop is almost directly across the street - **Shaw Vineyards**. Here the reds are a complete surprise compared to other vineyards in the area. What stands out is the old world, deep character of the Pinot Noir and the Cabernet Sauvignon. If you speak with winemaker Steve Shaw, you'll understand why. He has his own old world style of making wine, through dry farming and barrel aging, all done in a "lab" that in reality is a small tabletop. No other winery in the area does this to our knowledge. Shaw maintains quality both in the vineyard, harvesting only 2 to 3 tons per acre, and the bottle - cellar aging wine until he thinks the wine is ready to drink. Highlights tasted were an excellent 2006 Gewürztraminer, a very good 2007 Sauvignon Blanc, an off-dry 2006 Riesling and two vintages of Cabernet Sauvignon - the terrific 2003 and the still young but already delicious 2005.



Chateau LaFayette Reneau is what most wineries here strive to be. Many Finger Lakes wineries produce a wide variety of wines, ending up with a mix of some great wines and some not. LaFayette Reneau has a list of 18 wines and all of them serve a purpose, from simple table wines that are great for the price to world class ones, comparable to their old world counterparts. Topping it all off, the tasting room's

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patio presents a heavenly view of the area and the staff is very friendly. Unusually, the tasting starts with reds and moves to whites then sweet wines. Some visitors will balk but go with the flow - owner Dick Reno knows what he is doing. The Riesling is predictably great, but the Pinot Noir stands above many others in the area - soft and light with

nice earthy notes. If you are a fan of the "anti-chardonnay" movement - tired of the big oak and butter bombs coming out of California - Reneau's The Proprietor's Chardonnay is for you. A bit lighter than most other Chardonnays, it has integrated fruit bound by a butterscotch note on the nose and finish. The Cabernet Franc and the Proprietor's Reserve Cabernet, with smoky old world leather and earthy notes differentiating it from other wines of the area, are also good. In addition, Reneau's B&B is located next door, overlooking the vineyard and offering a great view of Seneca Lake from the back deck, where they also serve breakfast.

Down a hill off Route 414, **Damiani** has some of the best character of the wineries in the area. Here vines hug the hills leading down to Seneca Lake and the tasting room resembles a large barn. Winemaker Lou Damiani brings his bright energy to the wines he creates. Often you'll find guests in the back room barrel tasting with Lou, something we recommend to any wine lover for a deeper understanding of the winemaking process. While the whites were good - the 2008 Pinot Grigio being a big surprise - what makes Damiani different once again are the reds. The Pinot Noir has more power and bolder notes, but the Meritage takes the show. Few area vineyards try a Meritage blend and fewer accomplish a good one. Lou blends three grapes, the Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot, unleashing bright fruit followed by balanced acidity and tannins that can only be achieved by a truly talented winemaker. Other recommended wines include the 2007 Barrel Select Merlot and the very good 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon.



No mention of Finger Lakes wine is complete without mention of **Dr. Konstantin Frank Vinifera Wine Cellars** on Keuka Lake. This third generation winery was founded by Dr. Konstantin Frank who worked closely with French champagne maker Charles Fournier. Dr. Frank is the godfather of world-class winemaking in Finger Lakes and one taste of his award-winning Rieslings tells you why.

Prejean Winery is less known than some of the other wineries on Seneca Lake, even though its first vines were planted thirty years ago, but it's definitely worth a stop. Prejean specializes in whites, generally made in dry and semi-dry varieties. The Rieslings were predictably good but the semi-dry 2006 Gewurztraminer was excellent.



Heron Hill has its winery in a beautiful setting on Keuka Lake, with tasting rooms there and in a newer location on Seneca Lake. The winery's large tasting room on Keuka has been called one of the most spectacular in the world. Also onsite is the Blue Heron Café, which features many local and organic products. Heron Hill owner John Ingle has been

leading a green revolution, committing to following sustainable grape-growing practices in the coming years. The winery produces more than two dozen wines, which makes for a certain lack of focus but still yields some gems. The 2007 Classic Semi-Dry Riesling is a bestseller and a well made, easy drinking wine while the 2006 Ingle Vineyard Riesling was crisp and very good. Reds are also interesting - the winery has just released the area's first Blaufrankisch, a well made 2007 Reserve and a good 2006 Cabernet Franc. Dessert wines are standouts including the 2005 Late Harvest Chardonnay, which had a nice acidity, and the 2006 Ingle Vineyard Late Harvest Riesling, an excellent wine although steeply priced at \$74.99.

A new addition to the area is **Finger Lakes Distilling**, overlooking Seneca Lake. Just up and running in 2009, the distillery features a 20-foot tall still hand made in Germany. Concentrating on locally sourced ingredients, the distillery currently produces a Vintner's Vodka and a very good gin. Made from corn, Glen Thunder is their first whiskey and it is spicy with a sweet finish. They also make several liqueurs using local fruit including blueberry and raspberry. A true rye whiskey, McKenzie Rye Whiskey, will follow some time in Fall 2009 and they are currently working on a grappa.



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