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Riesling, the Crown Jewel of the Finger Lakes

BY DAVE POHL

For many wine drinkers and critics, Riesling is the grape most frequently associated with the production of fine wine in the Finger Lakes. This is, however, a relatively recent phenomenon. Though commercial wine production in the region dates back to the 1820s, wine made from Riesling was not sold until the Sixties.

Prior to 1950, it was generally believed that it was too cold in the Finger Lakes to grow *vinifera*, the species of European grapes that includes Riesling. Then, in 1953, Charles Fournier, president of Gold Seal Vineyards, met an immigrant winemaker from the Ukraine, Dr. Konstantin Frank. Frank was adamant that *vinifera* varieties could be grown on Keuka Lake, and Fournier agreed to begin some experimental plantings.

Dr. Frank began planting vines for his own winery, provocatively named Vinifera Wine Cellars, in 1960. Both his winery and Gold Seal produced Riesling wines, many of them quite good, through the Sixties and Seventies. In 1976, the State of New York enacted the Farm Winery Act, which made it legal for grape growers to bottle and sell their own wine. It is notable that some of the fledgling wineries founded shortly after passage of the act, such as Glenora and Heron Hill, included Riesling in their repertoire.

During the following decade, more and more Riesling began to show up in local wine shops. The quality was surprisingly good. This writer remembers being a judge in a blind tasting held before a rapt audience at a local fair in the early Eighties. One panel tasted a group of French and Finger Lakes Chardonnays, the other a selection of Rieslings from Germany and the Finger Lakes. The New York State Chardonnays were a disaster, with all the local wines ranked at the bottom. The Riesling panel, however,

DAVE POHL, MA '79, is a wine buyer at Northside Wine & Spirits in Ithaca. He came to Cornell in 1976 to work on a PhD in sociology; he was seduced by the wine business and has been at it ever since. He has been with Northside for nearly fifteen years, where he has recommended wines to many happy Ithacans and Cornellians.



UNIVERSITY PHOTOGRAPHY

preferred some of the Finger Lakes wines over the Germans.

The decades since have seen increases in both Riesling quality and acreage in the Finger Lakes. Land planted to Riesling grew from 385 acres in 1996 to 683 acres in 2006, and the wines have been garnering increased attention from critics. David Schildknecht, writing for Robert Parker's *Wine Advocate* in June 2006, produced the first serious overview of New York State wines in that publication's history. He referred to the "unique charm" of Finger Lakes Riesling and awarded a 90-point score to five Finger Lakes wines, each one a Riesling.

More recently, James Molesworth of *Wine Spectator* magazine has given a great deal of attention to the Finger Lakes in his personal blog on that publication's website. He offered a detailed account of three days of tasting in the Finger Lakes in the autumn of 2008, and early this year posted tasting notes for a group of Finger Lakes Rieslings as well as an interview with Fred Merwarth '00, the new owner of Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard. Molesworth wrote glowingly of Merwarth's 2007 Rieslings, noting in particular the winery's first-ever single-vineyard bottlings.

The critical attention seems to be fueling increased consumer interest. One can visit any number of online wine-related forums and bulletin boards and find dozens

of threads related to Finger Lakes wine, especially Riesling. If demand for these wines continues to increase, it's likely that the best ones will be gone from the marketplace quickly. The two largest producers of Finger Lakes Riesling, Dr. Frank and Wiemer, annually produce about 4,500 cases and 3,100 cases of Riesling, respectively—that's not a lot of wine compared to, say, the 700,000 cases per year churned out by Washington State's Chateau Ste. Michelle. In any case, it's nice to see some overdue attention being given to wines loved by so many Finger Lakes residents and Cornellians over the past few decades.

To become more familiar with the fine Riesling now being produced in the Finger Lakes, try some of these:

Anthony Road 2007 Dry Riesling
Anthony Road 2007 Semi-Dry Riesling
Atwater 2007 Dry Riesling
Dr. Frank Vinifera Wine Cellars 2007 Dry Riesling
Hermann J. Wiemer 2007 Dry Riesling
Hermann J. Wiemer 2007 Riesling Magdalena Vineyard
Heron Hill 2005 Riesling Ingle Vineyard
Hosmer 2007 Riesling
Ravines 2007 Dry Riesling Argetsinger Vineyard
Sheldrake Point 2007 Dry Riesling
Standing Stone 2007 Riesling
Treleaven 2007 Dry Riesling

Riesling: How Sweet?

Some wine drinkers say the reason they buy so little Riesling is that they're never sure how sweet the wine in a particular bottle will be. One winery could offer a "dry" Riesling that may, in fact, have a bit of residual sugar and taste almost as sweet as another's "semi-dry" Riesling.

There are no standard definitions for terms such as "dry," "semi-dry," or "sweet." Some wineries attempt to aid customers by printing the amount of residual sugar on the label, but one problem with this approach is that how sweet a wine tastes is not just a function of its sugar—acidity is also important. For example, a wine with 30 grams of sugar per liter with 9 grams of acidity may in fact taste drier than a wine with 20 grams of sugar but only 7 grams of acidity.

A number of groups and individuals are attempting to develop scales of perceived sweetness that could be applied with consistency by producers of wines such as Riesling that tend to vary in sweetness. The International Riesling Foundation (yes, there is such a thing) has suggested a four-level scale based

on a wine's acid-to-sugar ratio:

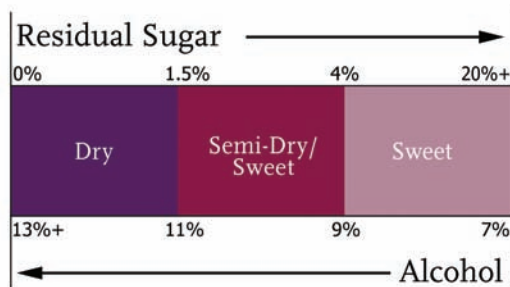
Dry: Does not exceed a 1:1 ratio

Medium-Dry: Has a ratio of 1:1.1 to 1:2

Medium-Sweet: Has a ratio of 1:2.1 to 1:4

Sweet: Has a ratio of 1:4.1 or higher

Richard Leahy of *Vineyard & Winery Management* magazine has proposed a graphic scale based on the relationship between residual sugar and alcohol, another important variable. His scale looks like this:



It remains to be seen how many wineries will adopt this scale or any other standardized method to indicate how sweet a given wine actually tastes. In the meantime, wine drinkers will need to rely on critics' tasting notes and the advice of good merchants to get what they want when purchasing an unfamiliar Riesling.

LISA BANKLAKI FRANK



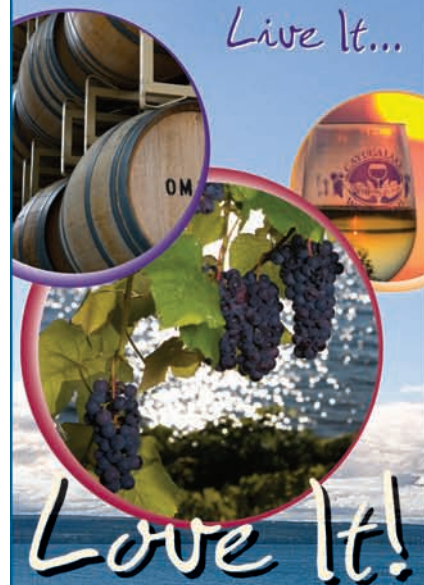
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*Seeing Red on
Long Island*

BY DAVE POHL

Unlike the Finger Lakes, Long Island does not have a long tradition of grape growing and wine-making. The region's first commercial *vinifera* winery, Hargrave Vineyard, was founded in 1973 on a site formerly used to grow potatoes. Alex and Louisa Hargrave, and others to follow, thought that the North Fork of Long Island was well suited to growing the grapes associated with France's Bordeaux region: Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot. Local vintners continue to feel that the maritime influence of

FRANK



the Atlantic Ocean and the excellent drainage inherent to the soils make for growing conditions similar to those of Bordeaux, and that's reflected in their production.

Today, more than fifty Long Island wineries produce wine from more than 4,000 acres of grapes. Though many types are made successfully, Long Island is increasingly identified

with its Cabernets, Merlots, and proprietary red blends. The quality, while not uniform, has been steadily improving. Local demand is high, but outside of the region and New York City the wines are still relatively unknown. Here's a short list of some of Long Island's better red producers—give them a try!

Wolffer Estate/Grapes of Roth

Wolffer Estate was founded in 1985 by the German-born Christian Wolffer, who died earlier this year. Though this Hamptons estate is well known for Chardonnay, its top wine is probably the Premier Cru Merlot. It's made from fruit sourced from a North Fork vineyard, and many feel this wine can exhibit an uncanny resemblance to a fine red Bordeaux. Available only at the winery, it is the first Long Island wine to be sold at a triple-digit price per bottle. Other reds, at less exalted prices, are also available.

Wolffer's winemaker, Roman Roth (also from Germany), produces a limited amount of Merlot under his own label, the Grapes of Roth. The wine, made at Wolffer, was first produced in 2001. The currently available vintage is 2003 and can be purchased through Roth's website. Early reviews are highly enthusiastic, and there is a waiting list for yet-to-be-released vintages.

Paumanok

Founded in 1983 by Lebanese-born Charles Massoud, Paumanok makes a variety of reds from Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot, as well as a less-well-known Bordeaux variety, Petit Verdot. The wines can show great complexity and have the ability to age. They are worth seeking out, especially the older vintages.

Jamesport Vineyards

This North Fork winery, founded in 1981, produces a range of reds that includes not only Bordeaux varieties but Pinot Noir and Syrah as well. Their wines exhibit particularly ripe fruit; the greatest successes have been Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and a blend called



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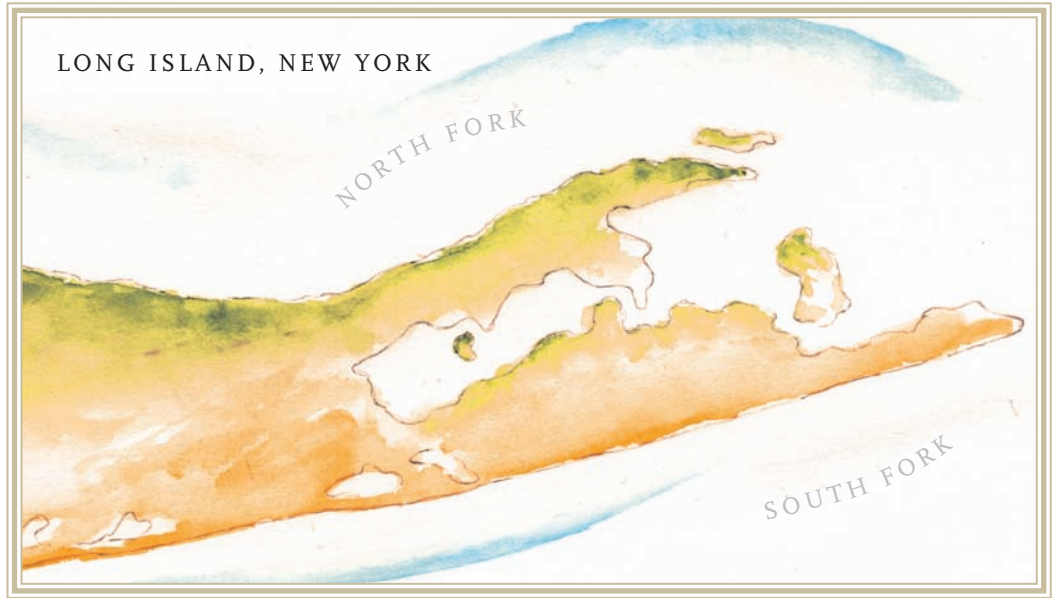


Melange de Trois. One white made here is worth noting for a non-drinking reason: a portion of the revenue from East End Chardonnay is donated to a Cornell project devoted to the restoration of the Long Island shellfish banks.

Pellegrini Vineyards
Another North Fork winery founded in 1981, Pellegrini produces reds from Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot. The wines are made in a fruit-forward style and can be quite richly flavored. Their Bordeaux blend, Encore, is an age-worthy red that shows great promise.

The Lenz Winery
A wide variety of wines are made at Lenz, founded in 1979. Of particular note is their Old Vines Merlot, which is well known for having held its own in a blind tasting at Le Bernardin

restaurant in Manhattan that included Chateau Petrus. The winemaker here is Eric Fry, whom many Ithacans and Cornellians remember from his days at Dr. Frank's Vinifera Wine Cellars on Keuka Lake.



LISA BANLAKI FRANK

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Teaching Winery Opens on Campus

With the snip of a grapevine, Susan Henry, the Ronald P. Lynch Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, opened the CALS Teaching Winery before a large crowd of faculty, students, vintners, and other guests on April 1.

Cornell, long known for its viticulture (grape-growing) research, now claims the only university teaching winery in the eastern United States. The \$900,000 facility promises to prepare students for careers in New York's wine and grape industry, which ranks third nationally in wine production and includes more than 250 wineries across the state.

Ian Merwin, the Cohn Professor of Horticulture, and Ramón Mira de Orduña, associate professor of enology, helped Henry unveil the 1,800-square-foot building. The winery, attached to the Cornell Orchards store, will act as the Ithaca hub for the College's new viticulture and enology undergraduate major, which enrolls about thirty students and draws on more than fifty faculty members from the horticulture, food science technology, plant pathology,

and applied economics and management departments. Inside the winery, students will access cutting-edge equipment to learn the science and art of winemaking.

"The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Teaching Winery represents a major enhancement to our Viticulture and Enology (V&E) program," said Henry. "Having this facility in Ithaca is crucial for our undergraduates, who will gain from hands-on experience in winemaking and grape-growing." At the ceremony, students offered tastes of experimental wines produced in a fall 2008 class. Nearby, Sabrina Lueck '10, a V&E major, said, "I'm beyond excited to begin using all the winery's beautiful equipment."

The winery includes state-of-the-art fermentation tanks and a modern microbiological and chemical lab, elements needed for the storage of grapes and the preparation and analysis of wines. It will allow students and faculty convenient access to three acres of hybrid wine grapes at Cornell Orchards and is near the program's Lansing vineyards, which grow more traditional varieties like Pinot Noir, Riesling, and Chardonnay.

— TED BOSCIA

Ted Boscia is a staff writer in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

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Five Finger Lakes Sparklers Worth Checking Out

BY DAVE POHL

While Finger Lakes winemakers are best known for their Rieslings and Gewurztraminers, some also have the potential to produce very good sparkling wine. Sparkling wines have been made in the region since the mid-nineteenth century—and in 1863, in fact, the Pleasant Valley Winery won a gold medal for its sparkling Catawba at a judging in Vienna, Austria.

Present-day Finger Lakes bubbly is more likely to be made from *vinifera*

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grapes such as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, though there are still examples produced from such native varieties as Catawba and Delaware, and French-American grapes such as Seyval and Cayuga are sometimes used as well. Experimentation is rampant, resulting in a diversity of styles and flavors. Here are some good examples:

Hermann Wiemer 2003 Blanc de Noir

This excellent sparkling wine from the pioneering Seneca Lake vintner Hermann Wiemer is produced primarily from Pinot Noir grapes. It is made by the *méthode Champenoise*, which is to say the wine's bubbles are produced through a secondary fermentation induced in the same bottle in which it will eventually be sold. This is a truly lovely wine, with a nose that hints at apple, citrus, and red





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fruits, underscored by a pleasant toasty note. The nutty, creamy flavors finish crisp, clean, and notably dry.

Swedish Hill NV Spumante Blush

While this bubbly may not appeal to those who favor dry wines, it is a fine example of a Labrusca-based sparkling wine. Made predominately from Catawba and Isabella grapes, it has that distinctively grapey aroma and flavor that so many love. Sweet, but not cloyingly so, this wine won the gold medal for sparkling wine at the 2008 New York Food and Wine Classic.

Chateau Frank NV Célèbre

Célèbre is one of the surprisingly few

FRANK



Riesling-based sparkling wines made in the Finger Lakes. It has an inviting, apple nose; on the palate, refreshing acidity is balanced by a touch of residual sugar. All of Chateau Frank's sparklers are worth trying, but this one may be the most distinctive.

Atwater 2006 Cuvee Brut

Here's something you don't find every day: a sparkling wine blended from Chardonnay, Gewurztraminer, and Riesling, in a bottle adorned by a boldly colorful label. Apple, peach, and spice mingle on both the nose and palate. Dry, but not bone dry, this wine pairs nicely with spicy Chinese and Thai dishes.



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Hosmer NV Brut

This Cayuga Lake winery has quietly made better and better wine over the past several years. Their non-vintage Brut is blended from Chardonnay and Cayuga, a hybrid variety developed at Cornell. It's a very flavorful wine, with particularly small bubbles that give it a slightly creamy texture.

Wine Trails

Learn more about the wine-making regions of New York State at these websites:

Cayuga Wine Trail
www.cayugawinetrail.com

Keuka Lake Wine Trail
www.keukawinetrail.com

Seneca Lake Winery Association
www.senecalakewine.com

Canandaigua Wine Trail
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Shawangunk Wine Trail (Hudson Valley)
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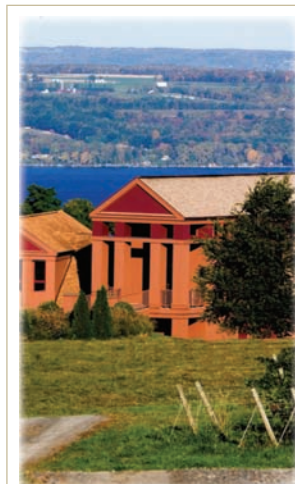
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