

Finger Lakes On The Rise

New York's largest wine-growing region gains widespread recognition



Red Feet Wine Market & Spirit Provisions in Ithaca, New York, stocks around 100 wines from the Finger Lakes, which is the store's third best-selling region behind France and Spain. Sales of these local offerings continue to increase.

The Finger Lakes region, which comprises 11 glacial lakes in Upstate New York, has a long history of winemaking that dates back to the early 19th century. However, it wasn't until the mid-20th century that the region's true potential came to light, when Ukrainian immigrant Dr. Konstantin Frank first successfully grew vinifera grapes like Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Noir and Riesling—which is now the darling of the Finger Lakes region.

Today, Frank's eponymous winery on Keuka Lake is one of the most reputable producers in New York, earning more than 100 gold medals in 2013. Such accolades have proved crucial in spreading the word about quality wines being produced in the Finger Lakes, which currently boasts 130 wineries and more than 9,000 acres of vineyards.

"I still remember in 2011 when Eric Asimov, wine critic for the New York Times, picked the 2009 Ravines Wine Cellars Dry Riesling as the best wine selection for Thanksgiving dinner," says Dewi Rainey, owner of Red Feet Wine Market & Spirit Provisions in Ithaca, New York. "Locals and tourists came in immediately to buy it and remembered Ravines and Finger Lakes Riesling for years to come."

In fact, Ravines Wine Cellars recently earned a spot on Wine Spectator's "Top 100 Wines of 2013" when its 2012 Dry Riesling ranked 33rd on the list. "We've definitely noticed an increase in our sales of Finger Lakes wine since there's been more media coverage of the area," Rainey says. "The Finger Lakes has steadily risen to become our third best-selling region behind France and Spain." Red Feet carries roughly 100 Finger Lakes wines, ranging from the 2012 Prejean Chardonnay (\$12 a 750-ml. bottle) to the 2010 Red Tail Ridge Teroldego (\$42).

For acclaimed sommelier Thomas Pastuszak, Finger Lakes wine has become a passion. He worked at Stella's bar and restaurant in Ithaca while studying at Cornell University. In 2011, Pastuszak returned to his hometown of New York City to work at Colicchio & Sons, where he was quickly promoted to wine director. "At the time, few wine professionals in the city knew about the Finger Lakes," he says. "I made it my personal mission to represent the best from the region. I wanted my guests and peers to see that the top Finger Lakes labels could share the same stage as the world's greatest wines." Pastuszak now serves as wine director at The NoMad, where he lists around 50 Finger Lakes wines, ranging from the 2011 Bloomer Creek Edelzwicker Riesling-Gewürztraminer (\$35 a 750-ml. bottle) to the 2011 Hermann J. Wiemer Magdalena Vineyard Dry Riesling (\$85).

In Brooklyn, Oleg Sakhno and his wife, Olga, opened Keuka Kafe, which highlights Finger Lakes wine and cheese, in 2012. "We first tried Finger Lakes wine about 12 years ago when visiting Lake Placid and were impressed with the lightness and aroma of their fruity wines and the complexity of their drier whites," Sakhno says. "But we had trouble finding Finger Lakes wines in New York City. Opening a Finger Lakes wine bar was an obvious choice for us." Keuka Kafe carries 19 different Finger Lakes wines, with the McGregor Sunflower White blend (\$8 a glass; \$36 a 750-ml. bottle), the 2012 Ravines Dry Riesling (\$11; \$44) and the 2008 Shaw Vineyard Pinot Noir Reserve (\$18; \$70) among the best-sellers.

"The area is set to become the next great wine region because there's investment going in, there's undiscovered terroir and—most importantly—there's already a solid foundation for making balanced wines with high acid," Pastuszak says. Just this winter, world-renowned wine producer Paul Hobbs purchased 50 acres on the southeastern side of Seneca Lake with plans to grow Mosel-style Riesling—a move that's sure to draw more attention to the quality of the region.

Beyond Riesling, the region's red wines are now garnering accolades as well: In October, Wine Spectator awarded the 2010 Damiani Wine Cellars Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon a score of 90—the highest rating to date for a Finger Lakes red wine. "The region's quality continues to improve by leaps and bounds every year," Rainey says. "And now that the wines can be found in markets like New York City, Chicago, Boston and Washington, D.C., and on high-profile fine-dining menus, the future of Finger Lakes wine looks bright."

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