

## Finger Lakes Vineyards - New York State

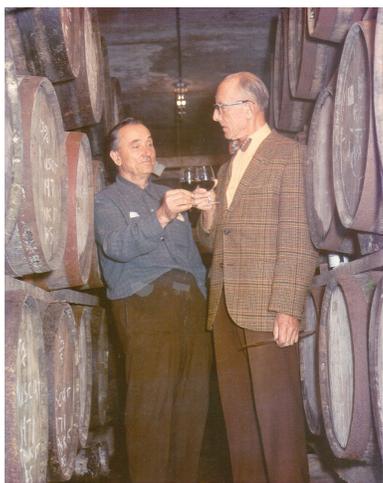
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*by wine writer Lilyane Weston*

When most people think of New York, they think of the Statue of Liberty, Broadway or Times Square. But New York has much more to offer than those wonderful attractions. New York has it all - great foods, great wines, great restaurants.

Did you know that New York State, with some 240 wineries and 13,000 hectares (32,500 acres) of vineyards, represents the third largest US wine producing region? In the mid 1600's, Dutch settlers brought grape varieties from Europe and Manhattan was the first place in New York State where grapes for wine-making were planted. Although making some outstanding wines, it is still somewhat undiscovered territory, especially on an international level. But give it a few years: things are changing.

Nestled among the rolling mountains on the east side of the Hudson River, one of the oldest and most historically important wine areas in America, the Hudson River region pioneered many of the innovations that have helped the New York wine industry grow and prosper.



Dr. Frank and Charles  
Fournier

New York's most recent wine region, 100 miles east of New York City, dates back about 35 years and is best known for its classic Bordeaux blends of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, called "Meritage" wines. The region offers sandy soils and is suitably tempered for grape growing.

South of the Canadian border, the long established New York wine making region around the Finger Lakes originally used the native vine, *Vitis Labrusca* characterised by a strange "foxy", almost medicinal

flavour. Now most wineries use the European *Vitis Vinifera* and concentrate on varieties well adapted to cool climates. Although conditions are marginal for grape-growing, some excellent sparkling

wine, Chardonnay, Riesling and Gewurztraminer prove that it is possible.

The finger-shaped lakes gave the name to the region. Thousands of years ago, glaciers sculpted the plateau of west central New York State. The long valleys filled with water thus creating "the Finger Lakes". The vineyards are located around four main lakes with native American names: Canandaigua (The Chosen Place), Seneca (Place of the Stone), Keuka (Canoe Landing) and Cayuga (Boat Landing).

The lakes temper the climate which, otherwise, would be far too cold to grow grapes successfully. The deep, narrow lakes, run north to south just below Lake Ontario. Surrounding the three largest, Keuka, Seneca and Cayuga, you find most of the region's vineyards. Increasing numbers of delicate, crisp white wines are produced, as well as elegant Pinot Noir, spicy Cabernet Franc and plummy Merlot.

Cayuga has its own American Viticultural Area designation. AVA is a system implemented in 1983 designed to identify U.S. wines in a fashion similar to the French Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) classification. Unlike the French regulations, however, the rules governing American viticultural areas (under the jurisdiction of BATF-Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms) are extremely lax and still evolving. An AVA is defined strictly by a geographic area, whereas in France the parameters are much more precise. A French AOC identifies the grape varieties that may be grown in a geographic area, the maximum production per acre, the minimum level of alcohol required for wines produced in the area, and so forth. The only requirement for wines utilizing an AVA on the label is that 85% of the grapes must be grown in that area.

The story of commercial winemaking in the Finger Lakes region of New York State dates from the mid 1800s. The heyday of the wine industry came to an abrupt end in 1919 with the passage of the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which banned the manufacture, sale, transportation and importation of intoxicating liquors within the United States. Only six Finger Lakes wineries survived the era of Prohibition, which ended in 1933. The Finger Lakes wine industry was slow to recover from the Prohibition Era. The Great Depression, followed by World War II altered consumer demand for wine. As the wine makers of the region entered the latter half of the 20th century, it became apparent they needed to rethink everything they had ever known about their product - and that included the grape itself. Up to this time the wineries of the Finger Lakes had relied entirely on the grapes native to North America, especially the Labrusca variety.

Two men may be credited with the revolution in viticulture, which revamped the wine industry of the Finger Lakes. Charles Fournier, a French vintner, came to work in Hammondsport in the 1950s, with the goal to upgrade its sparkling wine made with native grapes. Fournier's

experimentation with French-American hybrids, combining hardiness in the vineyard with the taste characteristics of European wines, opened new doors for vintners of the region. At the same time, Dr. Konstantin Frank, a recent Ukrainian immigrant, became convinced that the vinifera grapes (Europe wine grapes) would grow in the Finger Lakes Region and set out to prove his theory. In 1962 Dr. Frank's Wine Cellars produced its first vintage from his vinifera vineyard.

These innovations in viticulture played a major role in the development of the next phase of the wine industry of the region. In 1976 New York State passed legislation which allowed for the establishment of small-farm based wineries. The creativity and vitality that had characterized the early history of the wine industry was reborn. Increasingly, smaller winemaking operations remain an integral part of the fabric of the Finger Lakes Region.

Besides the attraction of visiting quality-minded wineries, the Finger Lakes Region offers an unspoilt vacation area with picturesque lakes, lush forests and fine restaurants. Locals in the picturesque town of Canandaigua, on the northern shore of Canandaigua Lake, proudly tell visitors that the largest wine company in the world is based here. This small town, situated some 30 miles southeast of Rochester, attracts the region's elite with its Victorian-style homes and antique shops and many houses of the shores of the Lake cost in excess of \$1 million.

New York State is well positioned to take advantage of the newest consumer trend, culinary and wine tourism, with the New York Wine & Culinary Centre opened in June 2006 in Canandaigua, along with a dozen wine trails. "Culinary tourism" includes cooking classes, dining out, visiting farmers' markets, gourmet food shopping, and food festivals; "wine tourism" includes participating in winery tours, visiting wine trails, sampling local wines, and attending wine festivals. Senator Hilary Clinton has become a true missionary for New York agriculture, including the grape and wine industry.

The quality of the wine and the beauty and hospitality of the Finger Lakes Region attract many visitors. Autumn is their favourite time of year to visit. There are many festivals to celebrate the harvest. The air is crisp with the smell of fresh grapes, the harvest is in full swing, and the wineries are buzzing with excitement. It's a great time to take a vineyard or cellar tour, with the added beauty of the brilliant foliage colours of autumn.

While the majority of the wine produced in the USA originates from California, there are some outstanding wines made in New York State. The growing number of talented winemakers in Long Island and the Finger Lakes has changed the image of New York State wines in a very short period of time. We can only guess, and hope, that it won't be long before we see these wines on the international circuit.