

2018
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Finger Lakes Wine Country

ESCAPE IN EVERY SENSE

A photograph of two women in a vineyard. The woman in the foreground has long brown hair, is wearing a tan long-sleeved shirt under a black quilted vest, and is holding a smartphone up to take a selfie. The woman behind her has blonde hair and is wearing a dark t-shirt. They are both smiling. The background consists of green grapevines and trees with some autumn-colored leaves.

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A Woman's Place... IS IN THE WINE INDUSTRY

LEADING LADIES OF
FINGER LAKES WINE COUNTRY

By Kate Meyers Emery



When I first started writing this article, I wanted to share how women had overcome obstacles to achieve greatness in the Finger Lakes.

Turns out that isn't the narrative here. That's not to say the Finger Lakes wine industry's leading women haven't had to overcome obstacles. Most have. But their journey hasn't been defined by gender. As Ann Raffetto puts it, she has always felt like an equal — she gets just as dirty as the men.

Talk to the key female players in the region's wine industry and all will tell you about the importance of collaborating and learning from the broader Finger Lakes wine scene — viewing other wineries as peers rather than competitors. Each echoed the value of constantly learning and adapting. All voiced a desire to exemplify the varietals and region with minimal intervention.

What struck me most was that they are all fearless. It took risks to get where they are, though their journeys were all so different.

LEADER OF THE PACK

Raffetto has been winemaker at Wagner Vineyards since

1983 — almost the same year as the winery's first vintage — and was the first female winemaker in the Finger Lakes region.

Her passion for wine began in 1977 while she was attending the University of California, Davis. After taking an introductory course in winemaking, she dedicated herself to the industry and graduated with a degree in enology.

When it came time to find employment, she didn't look to California, as so many winemakers do. Instead, Raffetto sought a job in the Finger Lakes.

Bill Wagner hired Raffetto in 1983. She was paired up with John Herbert, a home winemaker and assistant who had been helping since Wagner opened. Herbert knew the day-to-day operations of the winery, but didn't have the science background that Raffetto did.

"It was the start of a wonderful collaboration," she says. "We were always challenging and questioning our methods."

That included reaching out to other area wineries, too. When Raffetto started, there were only seven wineries in the Finger Lakes, so communication between them was crucial for the survival of the region.

"I really want the vintage to be expressed. I don't want it to taste the same every year."

—Ann Raffetto

After 25 years at Wagner, Raffetto continues to challenge herself to see what can be done better while still maintaining the style that the vineyard is known for. Her goal is to get the most out of the grapes, and try to let the grapes and vintage shine through.

"I really want the vintage to be expressed," she says. "I don't want it to taste the same every year."

LEARNING BY DOING

When Marti Macinski began dating her husband, Tom, they liked to go wine tasting when the weather wasn't nice enough to go sailing on Cayuga Lake. Those experiences inspired them to cash in frequent flyer miles and travel across the country to taste more wine.

On the way home, they decided they should start a winery.

"It was the most expensive free plane I ever took," Macinski says.



Ann Raffetto



Alex Doniger



Meaghan Frank

Now the former owner and co-founder of Standing Stone Vineyards continues to work as winemaker there — she has since 1991. Initially, Macinski didn't want to be the winemaker, but it made sense at the time. Her education in winemaking primarily came from jumping into the deep end and learning by doing, with help from Dave Whiting (Red Newt Cellars) and Russell Hearn (Suhru™ Wines).

Not long ago, Standing Stone Vineyards was sold to Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard. Eight years prior to that, the Macinskis began looking critically at the winery to see what changes were needed. They decided to stay small and let the next owner transform it.

They never intended to be a huge national winery. Macinski says they went into the business to “grow grapes and make wine” — great wine that worked locally and was an expression of the region.

“Our job as winemakers and growers is to make sure we get the best ... let's get the ripest grapes we can that have their own flavors, then just let those do what they want to do,” she says. “We just have to help it.”

LETTING NATURE SHINE

Alex Doniger says her interest in wine grew out of sharing it at special family dinners while at home in Connecticut.

“I worked in restaurants and wine bars throughout college,” she adds, “and afterward decided to keep going with that passion.”

While working at the Petrie Court Café and Wine Bar at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, Doniger discovered Finger Lakes wine. It inspired her to start a new adventure — in winemaking.

Working with Justin Boyette, co-owner of Hector Wine Co. and partner at Forge Cellars, gave Doniger the foundation she needed.

“I came to him with a small amount of cellar experience and he threw me right in,” she says. “By my second vintage, I was making my own wine for Hector Wine Company, and by my sixth, I earned the title of winemaker.”

She's currently winemaker at Hector Wine Co. and assistant winemaker at Forge Cellars, and her winemaking style focuses on emphasizing the natural characteristics of the wine. Doniger also gets involved in tastings, sales, social media, and outreach at both locations.

“I like to work with small batches, by hand and with minimal intervention but a lot of focus,” she says. “I'm really interested in using indigenous yeast and creating wines that aren't overmanipulated.”

STORY, PEOPLE, PLACE

Meaghan Frank, now the general manager of Dr. Konstantin Frank Wine Cellars, never

Photos: Clockwise, from top, Chandra Russell, Dr. Konstantin Frank Winery, Hector Wine Company, and Wagner Vineyards



FEATURE /
WOMEN IN WINE

imagined that she would join the family business.

While a student at Cornell University taking a senior course on wine, she began discovering new varietals and styles from around world.

“My dad and I really bonded over this,” she says. “He was excited about my newfound passion.”

It wasn't until she was studying for her master's degree in wine business at the University of Adelaide in Australia that she made the decision to get involved in the Finger Lakes wine industry.

When she returned to New York, Frank enrolled in a master's program in enology at Cornell to learn the winemaking side of the business. She recently completed her Wine and Spirit Education Trust Diploma Level 4.

“I still have a great deal to learn and have been gaining important practical experience at Dr. Frank's for the past few years working in many departments,” she says. “The best thing about this industry is that there is always something new to learn and always someone who knows more than you.”

What excites Frank right now is the opportunity to share Finger Lakes wine with a new generation.

“There is an energy right now in the Finger Lakes that is palpable,” she says. “We have always had very passionate people in the area, but the difference now is that we are getting better at marketing our region and wines.”

Her goal isn't just to offer great wine, but to give people a one-of-a-kind experience. “Wine is about the story and the people and place,” she says, “just as much as it is about the actual liquid in the bottle.”

Kate Meyers Emery is the creator and author of *VinifeROC.com*, a blog exploring Rochester and the Finger Lakes region one wine glass at a time. Follow her at @kmeyersemerly.