



As though clawing their way south toward Pennsylvania, western New York's Finger Lakes reach out across the site of a 500 million-year-old seabed. When glaciers gouged their way along the riverbeds of this region in the last ice age, deep water, shale and fossil lime became their bequest to late-20th-century vintners. Recent climatic trends may further play into the hands of this young viticultural zone, as an imaginative band of vintners usher in the new millennium with the most diverse and distinctive wines yet to grow in these soils.

Classic European vinifera vines transformed the Finger Lakes from its role as a supplier of table grapes and bulk wine; these arrived a mere half-century ago due to the visionary tenacity of Ukrainian-German immigrant Konstantin Frank and the employer who took a chance on him, Charles Fournier. Received opinion and early experience indicated that *Vitis vinifera* couldn't withstand the region's bitterly cold winters and humid summers. But Frank proved that with the right rootstocks and viticultural methods, vinifera could become commercially viable.

In 1976, fourteen years after Frank founded Vinifera Wine Cellars and at a time when Finger Lakes wine producers were feeling the effects of California's rapid growth, New York passed a State Farm Wine Act that set the stage for a proliferation of family wineries. Mosel-born Hermann Wiemer had already planted an unprecedented 140 acres of vinifera. His nursery of vines as well as his ideas became the seedbed for a generation that has confirmed this region's potential. Frank had established his vineyards along Lake Keuka, nearest the traditional commercial center of Hammondsport. But the pioneers of vinifera soon moved eastward to Lake Seneca and Lake Cayuga, driven by terroir. Critical criteria for success here are the thermal retention and reflective capacity of deep lakes and shale soils that offer excellent root penetration and drainage. The huge surface area and 600-foot depth of Lake Seneca dwarfs Keuka. Furthermore, the terrain permits vine-growing close to the water, and calcium from a concentration of fossilized marine life insures the catalytic presence of active lime.

"Climatic warming trends will effect where pinot is propagated. We should see more consistant quality and ripeness throughout the region. There's more interest in pinot noir than vineyards to support the demand." -Hermann Wiemer

THE RULE OF RIESLING

Their Germanic backgrounds alone inevitably recommened riesling to both Frank and Wiemer. And it is scarcely possible to avoid drawing analogies from the marginal, "cool climate" Mosel and its slate to the Finger Lakes and their shale. so off-dry riesling became the first card played when vintners from the Finger Lakes came calling on the outside world.

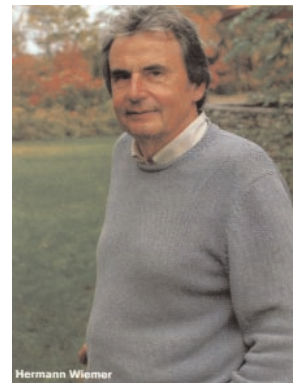
But nature more than man seems to be responsible for a recent stylistic shift taking place in Finger Lakes riesling. The best wines increasingly, are dry-tasting if not analytically bone dry and significantly fuller-bodied than is typical on the Mosel. Wiemer's "Riesling Dry" offers a case in point. The floral and pit-fruit character of this wine is nicely supported by only a few grams of residual sugar, and if the wine seems to hint at sweetness, this is primarily a function of its gentle palate impression. Raise the grams of residual sugar past the teens - where sweetness in a Mosel riesling would still be barely noticeable - and one has a Wiemer "SemiDry Riesling" that tastes downright sweet. With few exceptions, Finger Lakes rieslings cannot bear a very large load of sugar without their sweetness dominating. Certainly, lower-than-Mosel acidity plays a role in this phenomenon, but experience demonstrates that this is not by any means the entire

story, and one is compelled to consider preceived sweetness as a more complex function of terroir.

The best riesling bottling from Konstantin Frank (Vinifera Wine Cellars). Weimer, Heron Hill, Lafayette Reneau and Standing Stone combine generosity of flowers, pit fruits, subtle citrus and spice with a gentleness of touch and soothing, at times satiny texture that are quite unlike the Mosel, if not downright un-Germanic. New stylistic ground is mean time being broken in a collaboration among Johannes Reinhardt of Anthony Road and Peter Bell of Fox Run - both located north of Weimeron the western shore of Lake Seneca - along with David Whitting of Red Newt on the generally warmer eastern side of Seneca. Their 2004 Tierce Dry Riesling represents a blend that is adamantly dry amd decidedly full-bodied, with a chalky minerality and fusel character that would not taste out of place in Reinhardt's native Franken or in Alsace.

GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT GEWURZ

Where there's riesling, at least in North America, there seems inevitably to be the fire and spice of gewurztraminer. This has often been a result of homage to Alsace - one thinks of Navarro or Claiborne and Churchill in California whose successes with both of these varieties remain faithful to French stylistic ideals.



Hermann Wiemer

The Finger Lakes, however, appear poised to chart new territory with the notoriously tricky Traminer. Consider the gewurztraminers of Lamoreaux Landing in the so-called banana belt of Seneca's western shore - where reflective surface and depth make the lake most capable of warming the surrounding vineyards - and also (particularly from Wiemer) on the opposite shore. These are full of the rose petal, litchi, sweet pea, bacon fat and spice that are captured only where yields are low and grapes can be exposed to long hang time free of obscuring leaf cover. Yet even in nominally cool-climate European regions, ripening gewurztraminer to the requisite richness of flavor has increasingly meant harvesting at sugar levels so high that winemakers must choose between significant residual sugar or high alcohol, neither easily integrated into the fabric of a grape that is inherently low in acidity and prone to bitterness.

The Lamoreaux Landing and Wiemer Gewurztraminers swing between 11.5 and 13 percent alcohol (depending on vintage) and are entirely free of heat or bitterness. But more important, they possess a lift and elegance - without acidification - that are nearly unprecedented. With modesty, Wiemer - who has the largest plantings of this grape in New York and is a source for vines with Alsace heritage - points out that northern Italy's Alto Adige achieves a similar result.

Lamoreaux Landing owner Mark Wagner - who took over his father's nursery business at age 22 and became a vinifera specialist, then eventually a winemaker - concurs that there seems to be a distinct Finger Lakes gewurztraminer style. He believes that excellent drainage and the relatively cool, long growing season are critical factors, as the sun must shine on the clusters for proper ripeness - which in warmer regions could court raisining. He also advocates prefermentative skin contact, which in another terroir - including many classic gewurztraminer-growing regions - could accentuate bitterness. Wiemer points out that this grape is more demanding in its choice of site than riesling, and he blends different lots in order to optimize different aspects of flavor and structure.

COURTING MADAME PINOT

Given an early head start with riesling and an undeniably cool climate, it's natural that growers in the Finger Lakes have succumbed to the lure and challenge of Burgundy's great red grape. A local selection - the "Frank clone" - offered for many years the principal hope for good red wine results. In recent years, late 20th-century Burgundian clones have made an appearance in the Finger Lakes, and results with pinot noir are now more than merely promising.

Richard Figiel of Silver Thread (south of Lamoreaux Landing) says he would be happy if the market allowed him to grow nothing but riesling and pinot noir. His approach with the latter is avowedly low-tech, unhurried and hands-off in the cellar - but in the vineyard it is a different matter. He pounces on his pinot vines when he thinks the moment is right. "I don't want too much alcohol, and at 21 to 23 degree Brix, I get ripe flavors. You can easily get prune flavors here. I've learned over the years to not let pinot hang out there too long." His marrowy, positively carnal, rich and expansive 2002 is proof that there is life for American pinot beyond mere fruits and berries. Johannes Reinhard's Pinot from five-year-old Dijon and Swiss clones at Anthony Road is another success that displays striking smoked-meat and mineral-salt character and will be fascinating to follow in the bottle and at the dinner table. Hermann Wiemer's first crop on pinot, in 2002 was promising. The 2003 was rendered solely as sparkling wine and 2004 simply failed to make the grade. But Wiemer's 2005 - from half-ton-per-acre yields and with natural alcohol in the upper 12's - is promisingly redolent of sweet cherry, nuts and tea. He's banking on the effects of global warming to usher in "more consistent quality and ripeness." For now at least, "there is more interest in pinot noir than vineyards to support the demand."

FRANCLY SPEAKING

Cabernet franc, says Richard Figiel, "is the current darling red of the Finger Lakes." Like gewurztraminer, franc needs to stay close to deep water, and its canopy and crop level require sensitive, but at times aggressive, management. Unforgivingly vegetal if underripe, in the Finger Lakes franc shows itself capable of displaying the florality and spice, ripe but fresh black fruit, nut oils and creaminess of texture that only this grape can achieve.

Richard Figiel's "Blackbird" - a blend of two-thirds cabernet franc with one-third cabernet sauvignon - offers nutty, almost roasted richness, deep cassis fruit and silken texture. It proves the potential of franc in the Finger Lakes, not only by being so delicious but also by having been made from purchased fruit. Figiel waited to plant his own franc until last year, still insisting that it's "not as interesting a wine in this area as pinot noir can be. I am not too often impressed by 100 percent cab franc around here. I think it works better in some kind of blend."

But plenty of wines are challenging that assessment. At Anthony Road, Johannes Reinhard - who like most others harvest his franc later the pinot - has captured fresh floral perfume and ripe fruit with vines only at the beginning of their productive life. Mark Wagner's un-oaked 2002 Lamoreaux Landing Cabernet Franc "T23" was bottled very young to preserve juicy freshness: it still has a creamy patina and real floral nuance while having gained complexity in the bottle. The barrel-rendered 2002 version indeed has trouble keeping up. And from 2005 both styles are highly promising and loaded with dark fruits and oily richness. Wagner tailors the fermentative regimen to his fruit, carefully gauging what he deems the optimal, vintage-dependent length of fermentation, sometime pressing to tank or barrel at dryness and sometimes before all the sugar is gone.

Former Lamoreaux Landing winemaker Rob Thomas and his wife Kate - unique among Finger Lakes vintners - bill their Shalestone winery as "red only." Almost predictably, their 2003 Cabernet Franc (at 13 percent alcohol) is singularly successful and far more interesting than that vintage's merlot. David Whiting at Red Newt works with two sources of franc, the smaller of which - from Glacier Ridge Vineyards - displays that aromatic sweetness of honey, flowers and machine oil that make you think you are in a joint florist's and tool-and-die shop, an impression that only cabernet franc can deliver. Hermann Wiemer's franc - planted in the same year (1999) as his pinot - pleased him so much in its first year that he planted more. In the manner of his gewurztraminer, Wiemer's 2005 Franc - picked October 23 - manages to offer creaminess of texture with juicy natural acidity and no heat. It seems that the terroir is speaking a coherent tongue.

All of these newfound Finger Lakes successes are coming with yield-sensitive varieties. Numerous winemakers confess their frustration with a prevalent mentality of crop load rather than quality among growers. But if quality in the bottle is rewarded, that will work its way increasingly down to the farming level. Ultimately, the critical factor will be the consumer. The prices being asked for bottlings by even the top estates of the Finger Lakes region have room to grow while still remaining relative bargains. These estates are producing delicious renditions of classic European varieties, variations on some familiar themes that cannot be played elsewhere. What began with riesling may be the beginning of a multifaceted career on the world's wine stage.