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Finger Lakes wineries search for red grapes to build their reputation on

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Bob Madill, co-owner at Sheldrake Point Vineyards on Cayuga Lake, shows some Gamay Noir grapes, an uncommon variety used in his winery.

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Since the 1980s, after **Dr. Konstantin Frank** paved the way for Finger Lakes winemakers to grow and make wines from the classic European grapes known as vinifera, Riesling has soared to the top as the star white wine grape of the region.

What about reds?

Decades into the surge in **quality wine-making in the Finger Lakes**, where cold-hardy grapes are essential, vintners and vineyard owners seem to be searching for a vinifera grape that can stake a claim to be the region's signature red, or at least build a solid reputation.

Extensive production of familiar varieties like Pinot Noir and Merlot and the lesser known, but widely planted, Cabernet Franc are yielding good wines, but none have had the star power of Riesling.

Now more and more wineries are playing around with some relatively

obscure or uncommon red vinifera varieties, like Lemberger, Gamay Noir or Teroldego, grapes that are native to cooler parts of Europe.

"We are what we are, and that's a cool climate," said Bob Madill, co-owner of **Sheldrake Point Vineyards** in Ovid, on the western shore of Cayuga Lake. "We just have to see what we can plant to make good wine with."

Maybe one will become a regional star. Or perhaps the winemakers will simply find something that

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works well in their own vineyard, as Sheldrake Point has done with Gamay Noir, the grape behind the famous Beaujolais wines in France.

"This is a region that is still relatively young (with vinifera), and still kind of identifying what works and what doesn't," said Hans Walter-Peterson, viticulture extension specialist at the [Finger Lakes Grape Program](#), a unit of Cornell Cooperative Extension.

Both Madill and Walter-Peterson agree that it may not be necessary for the region to have one identifiable red variety.

In a way, Walter-Peterson said, Finger Lakes winemakers are lucky to have the freedom to experiment. California winemakers tend to cluster around the tried-and-true, like Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel, while other states have established red identities: Oregon with Pinot Noir, Washington with Syrah and even Missouri with Norton.

"Here in the East, there's more freedom," he said. "They can find a niche. Maybe they make a good Cabernet Franc, or they can turn to something else that really hammers home with consumers."

Tinkering with grapes

At [Red Tail Ridge Winery](#) near Penn Yan, on the west side of Seneca Lake, owner/winemaker Nancy Irelan is more than ready to try new things. Before coming to the Finger Lakes with her husband and vineyard manager, Michael Schnelle, she worked in research and development for Gallo wines in California.

"Once you're a researcher you never give up doing it," Irelan said. "I like to tinker."

Her first bit of tinkering has been with Teroldego, a northern Italian grape. She and Schnelle planted the first Teroldego vines in 2006, knowing it takes a few years for them to produce wine-worthy fruit.

The 2008 vintage turned out to be well-suited to make a sparkling wine, and so that became the Finger Lakes' first varietal Teroldego wine. (Varietal means a wine made primarily from one grape.)

The 2009 harvest was just one barrel -- or about 25 cases worth. It's still in a tank, waiting for Irelan to decide what to make of it. It will not be sparkling, and it could be either a varietal Teroldego or blended with other grapes from her vineyards for an estate red.

She has high hopes for the future of Teroldego.

"It's still young vines, so we have to see how it survives the winters," she said. "But so far so good."

At Sheldrake Point, about halfway down Cayuga Lake's western shore, co-owner Bob Madill planted his Gamay Noir grapes in the mid-1990s, when the winery opened. He is a native of Ontario, and had worked in Canada's Niagara wine region, where Gamay was planted.

Sheldrake Point has produced Gamay Noir for several years, but few of its Finger Lakes competitors have followed suit.

"It's hard to say how it would do as a regional style," Madill said. "We're just a little pinpoint in the region."

Madill sees some climate similarities between the Finger Lakes wine region and France's Beaujolais region, where Gamay is the signature grape.

But he points out that cooler climates are never going to produce the kind of red wines that consumers have come to expect from warmer regions like California.

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

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"Our climate is going to give us more modest wines, not the high alcohol, jammy, big fruit reds like you get in California," he said. "These northern styles may not be as dramatic, but they are expressive."

Lemberger on a roll

While Teroldego and Gamay Noir production is quite limited, Lemberger has been growing steadily as a red variety for several Finger Lakes wineries. Among those planting the grape are Anthony Road, Goose Watch, Hosmer and Fox Run.

It has some similar qualities to Cabernet Franc, a variety that many winemakers once believed could be the signature Finger Lakes red. Both have, or should have, a black pepper quality, for example. Anthony Road has had some success with a Lemberger/Cab Franc blend.

At **Keuka Spring Vineyards**, at the northeast tip of Keuka Lake, the Wiltberger family began planting Lemberger in 1999. It's a grape with origins in the cold climate of central Europe, particularly Austria.

"For us it's more consistent from year to year than Cabernet Franc," said Mark Wiltberger, the Keuka Spring winemaker. "We're happy to bottle it as a varietal each year."

One issue with Lemberger that most winemakers agree on is the name: It's awfully similar to Limburger, a smelly variety of cheese.

In Austria, it's known as Blaufrankisch, which Irelan at Red Tail Ridge admits "is not much of an improvement."

Red Tail Ridge also produces Lemberger, and Irelan says she finds it a versatile grape whose wines have "light cherry and beautiful black pepper."

Could it be the Finger Lakes identifiable red?

"It's hard to say what the signature red of the Finger Lakes ought to be, but as far as the style of wine it might be Lemberger," Wiltberger said.

So the region's winemakers will continue their experiments.

"We'd like it to hold its own," Irelan said of a good Finger Lakes red. "We'd like to create something that's full-bodied and that does well here and has a heritage of producing fine red wines."

Three grapes at a glance

Lemberger

Keuka Spring Vineyards (Keuka Lake), among others

The grape: Lemberger originated in the cooler climate of Central Europe, including Austria, where it is known as Blaufrankisch. About a dozen Finger Lakes wineries are making wines with it.

"It's medium-bodied, with distinctive fruit and a light peppery quality to it."

-- Mark Wiltberger, winemaker

Gamay Noir

Sheldrake Point Vineyards (Cayuga Lake)

The grape: Gamay Noir is best known as the grape found in wines of the Beaujolais region in northern France. Sheldrake's vines came to the Finger Lakes via Ontario.

"Gamay is a pleasant, fruity, accessible style of wine for this part of the world ... a little lighter, fruitier style."

-- Bob Madill, co-owner

Teroldego

Red Tail Ridge Winery (Seneca Lake)

The grape: It comes from Trentino-Alto Adige, in northern Italy. Red Tail Ridge turned its 2008 vintage into a sparkling wine, but plans a still varietal (single grape) or blend with the 2009 vintage.

"It has a beautiful, full texture, perfectly nice acidity, ... juicy red fruit, jam, dried currant, earthy notes."

-- Nancy Irelan, co-owner and winemaker

About vinifera grapes

The Finger Lakes produces wine from three grape species: labrusca, the native American grapes like Niagara or Catawba; vinifera, the grapes that produce the famous European-originated wines like Pinot Noir and Riesling; and hybrids of the two, some created by Cornell University, like Cayuga White or Baco Noir. More "sophisticated" wine enthusiasts tend to prefer vinifera because they believe those grapes produce the most consistent and high-quality wines.

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