



David Peterson, Swedish Hill (left); Nancy Irelan, Red Tail Ridge Vineyards; and Scott Osborn, Fox Run Vineyards, with Seneca Lake in the background. (Photo by Neil Sjoblom)

# Fox Run, Swedish Hill, and Red Tail Ridge

## Three Seneca and Cayuga Lake Producers Exemplify Finger Lakes Evolution

Story by **Richard Leahy** > east coast editor

**T**he Eastern U.S. wine region that has generated perhaps the most “buzz” in major wine competitions and the national consumer wine press is the Finger Lakes region of west-central New York state. While it has become well-known for world-class riesling in the last five years, the region is remarkably diverse. Local vineyards grow native, French hybrid, Cornell hybrid, and a range of cool-climate vinifera grapes, and Finger Lakes winemakers are producing impressive red, sparkling, and dessert wines in addition to the region’s famous white wines. The terroir of the Finger Lakes is easily rec-

ognizable in its wines, showing a consistency across the species and varietal spectrum of grapes, with bright, lively fruit, racy acidity, and clean, refreshing texture.

Cayuga Lake, Seneca Lake, Keuka Lake, and Canandaigua Lake—the largest and deepest Finger Lakes—have a localized “lake effect” that makes viticulture possible near the lakes, while it is not sustainable either on the ridges between the lakes or the flat areas beyond the close shores. The deep lakes combined with the slopes of their adjacent land act as heat sinks (the heat summation is 2,400 growing degree-days in Geneva).



## FEATURE STORY

### RED TAIL RIDGE: SUSTAINABILITY AND TERROIR-DRIVEN WINES

Red Tail Ridge is owned and operated by the husband-wife team of Mike Schnelle and Dr. Nancy Irelan. Irelan was formerly vice president of viticulture and enology research and development at E. & J. Gallo. Located just south of Fox Run Vineyards on west Seneca Lake, the winery was named for the red-tailed hawks that nest in nearby woods and circle on thermal drafts from Seneca Lake.

Asked why she and Schnelle chose to start a winery in the Finger Lakes, Irelan explained that the money would go much further there than anywhere on the West Coast. Also, she says, "We wanted to be part of creating community" and helping to define an emerging wine region. "Now is a terrific time to be here."

### BUILDING A VINEYARD

Irelan and Schnelle used soil maps—and word-of-mouth tips—in their



Reflecting the philosophy of its owners, the entrance to Red Tail Ridge showcases the vineyard.

search for vineyard land. When they heard in 2004 that a 34-acre property covered with scrub and trees had come on the market, they decided it was worth the trouble to clear the land

completely and plant the vineyard. They installed tile drainage following the contours of the slope instead of rows, which has aided in uniform vine development and management.

The 20-acre vineyard was planted from 2005-2007 to exclusively vinifera varieties. It is dominated by 14 acres of riesling, with smaller amounts planted to chardonnay, pinot noir, dornfelder (a German vinifera cross), and teraldego, a native of Italy's Trentino Alto that was recommended by the late Bob Poole, viticulturist emeritus of Cornell University. Rootstocks are mostly C-3309 and 101-14. Spacing is tight (8 feet by 3 feet for riesling and

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### Red Tail Ridge Vineyards

**Location:** Penn Yan, NY (Seneca Lake).

**Established:** Vineyards planted 2005-2007; tasting room opened in 2007.

**Principals:** Nancy Irelan, co-owner/winemaker; Michael Schnelle, co-owner; Jim Robideau, vineyard manager.

**Annual Case Production:** 2,000-plus.

**Acreage:** 20 acres farmed.

**Varieties:** Riesling (14 acres), along with chardonnay, pinot noir, dornfelder, and teraldego.

**Distribution:** More than 90% sold in the tasting room.



Red Tail Ridge co-owners Nancy Irelan and Mike Schnelle stand in their sustainably farmed vineyard.

8 feet by 4 feet on the front hill) with cane pruning, and vines were laser-planted.

Irelan explains that cane pruning gives more bud fruitfulness, which is good insurance against winter injury.



Red Tail Ridge's vineyards are characterized by cane pruning, close spacing, and straight rows.

Combined with VSP training, it allows for better shoot positioning and leaf pulling and less waste of spray material. With complexity as a goal, Irelan has also paid close attention to clonal diversity. Four clones of riesling are planted, including the classic German clone Ngo, in addition to Dijon clones of pinot noir.

#### MODELING SUSTAINABILITY

In addition to technical and research skills, Red Tail Ridge brings a focus on sustainability to the Finger Lakes industry.

"Sustainability has always been a priority for me," Irelan explains, and that focus is carried over to Red Tail Ridge. With this in mind, the winery uses cover crops—rows alternate with rye grass and hay—to improve soil nutrition and help with integrated pest management.

Irelan also stresses the communitarian aspect of sustainability. "I couldn't imagine not putting an emphasis on sustainability since we're part of the community," she says. "We have to respect that." She also points out that sustainability is becoming a consumer expectation. "We need to take (it) seriously now."

A key part of Red Tail Ridge's sustainability program is the design and construction of the winery, now in the planning stages with Edge Architecture PLLC of Rochester, NY. (Currently the wine is custom crushed and there is only a tasting room is onsite). According to Allen Ros-

signol of Edge Architecture, there are 69 possible credits and Red Tail Ridge identified 35 that it wanted to incorporate to earn a silver level of certification.

Energy optimization and water conservation are major priorities in the design (the tasting room will be sited to maximize sun exposure), and Irelan hopes to use as much local building material as possible to reduce the carbon footprint of construction. Irelan explains that transparency in the winery construction is a goal, so other wineries in the region can learn how they can also employ sustainable design concepts.

#### WINE STYLE AND QUALITY

Wine style at Red Tail Ridge is vineyard-driven. "The vineyard drives aroma development" in details like cluster count, shoot positioning, and canopy microclimate, Irelan explains. The product line currently straddles the '05-'07 vintages and features two chardonnays, four rieslings, estate pinot noir, lemlinger, and a blanc de noirs. With the 2008 vintage, the entire product line is now single-vineyard designated. Wine quality is high (ranging in retail price from \$9.95 to \$29.95), successfully fulfilling Irelan's style description. The wines point toward the Old World with Burgundian chardonnay and pinot noir and Mosel-like rieslings, but they are also nervy, racy examples of Finger Lakes terroir and clean New World winemaking. The 2007 estate pinot noir is perhaps the most exciting pinot yet made in the Finger Lakes, and significantly, weighs in at only 12% alcohol.

#### INTEGRATING INTO THE FINGER LAKES WINE COMMUNITY

Irelan is thankful for the sense of community that she and Schnelle have found in the Finger Lakes. "It's a very friendly atmosphere here," she says, compared to the California industry, which she describes as "so corporate and not as personal." While her consulting business, The Answer Grape, keeps her traveling a lot, Irelan says she is looking forward to spending more time at the winery as it develops. "I just want to share my wine," she says.

**THREE TOP PRODUCERS ON SENECA AND CAYUGA LAKES**

Seneca Lake is the heart of the Finger Lakes; it lies between Keuka Lake to the west and Cayuga Lake to the east. The largest of the 11 Finger Lakes, Seneca Lake is 35 miles long, with a maximum depth of 634 feet. Seneca Lake earned its own AVA in 2003, which dominates vineyard acreage within the Finger Lakes. Cornell University's Agricultural Extension Station is located in Geneva, at the north end of Seneca Lake. Cayuga Lake was the first of the sub-appellations to be established within the Finger Lakes AVA in 1988. There are nearly 20 wineries around Cayuga Lake, home to Cornell University on the southern tip of the lake.

Not surprisingly, Seneca Lake and nearby Cayuga Lake are home to three of the region's outstanding producers: the Swedish Hill family—which includes Goose Watch and Penguin Bay wineries—Fox Run Vineyards, and Red Tail Ridge. Swedish Hill offers a wide range of wines, focusing on consumer demand while consistently winning top awards. (Penguin

*"The terroir of the Finger Lakes is easily recognizable in its wines, showing a consistency across the species and varietal spectrum of grapes, with bright, lively fruit, racy acidity, and clean, refreshing texture."*

Bay is on Seneca Lake; the others on nearby Cayuga Lake). Fox Run Vineyards is known for its focus on select vinifera varietals and for leadership in the industry. Red Tail Ridge is making a name for itself with vineyard-driven, high-quality vinifera wines of compelling terroir.



View east from Glenora Wine Cellars to Hector, where lake depth and slope illustrate a favorable site for viticulture.