

Stirring the Lees with James Molesworth

The Finger Lakes, Day 1: The High-Rent District

Posted: 07:28 AM ET, June 23, 2009

Seneca Lake is the high-rent district of the Finger Lakes. Lining both its west and east shores are the highest percentage of the region's wineries, as well as some of its best.

About 15 miles north of Wiemer, along the west side of Seneca, is [Red Tail Ridge](#), a newcomer to the area. Owned by the husband-and-wife team of Michael Schnelle and Nancy Ireland, Red Tail Ridge was founded in 2004 when the couple bought a 34-acre wooded property which they partially cleared and began planting vines (there are now 20 acres of Riesling, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Teroldego).

Ireland is from New Jersey, Schnelle from Minnesota. They met while attending college in Denver and had been living in California before making the move back east. That roundabout trip has given them extensive and broad experience which the couple now brings to their new winery.

Ireland, 48, has a doctorate in vine genetics from UC Davis and spent 12 years working for California's large Gallo operation as vice president of vine research and development. Schnelle, 47, has done everything from run his own company to handle heavy machinery in the construction business to managing a commercial horse farm.

That combination of using hard science and gritty hands-on work has resulted in an immaculate vineyard property, replete with tightly spaced, laser-sighted rows that show pristine canopy management and feature drip irrigation, uncommon in the area. Extensive diversion ditches and drainage piping was also put into the vineyards, with the aim of achieving a uniformity of moisture levels throughout the property (humidity and moisture are common in the area).

"Here we're trying to mitigate soil moisture, which is the opposite of what gets done on the West Coast," said Irelan in her matter-of-fact style.

It's a level of precision and attention to detail that the area's viticulture is generally lacking.

Dealing with soil moisture isn't the only thing Irelan has found different from her tenure on the West Coast. Though her research work brought her to Cornell often and she was familiar enough with the area and its potential for producing quality Riesling, "It was still quite a chance for me to deal with cool climate fruit," said Irelan, who credits the help and advice of [Fox Run winemaker Peter Bell](#), as well as Derek Wilbur, winemaker at [White Springs Farm](#). For now, the wines are being made with Bell's help via the custom crush end at neighboring [Fox Run](#) winery.

So far, the early returns are proving the couple has picked the right spot. The winery's first commercial vintage was 2007, with the dry Riesling earning an impressive 88 points. A barrel fermented Chardonnay is also tasty—no new oak is used—producing a cleaner, fresher style.



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Coming soon: Red Tail Ridge winery facility. Owners Nancy Irelan and Michael Schnelle hope to have it done in time for the 2009 harvest.

"Our focus is vinifera and dry styles of wine," said Irelan. "Even the Pinot Noir rosé is dry."

While the winery will focus on Riesling, small amounts of Pinot (including some Swan clone) and Teroldego have been planted as part of the always-ongoing search in the area for a viable red variety.

"There are only so many risks you can take with a commercial vineyard though," said Irelan.

It's a refreshing approach in a region where off-dry and frankly sweet wines are often still made to lure in customers and boost tasting room sales, rather than a narrow focus on dry, vinifera bottlings that require more of a push to get into the marketplace.

Until Red Tail Ridge's estate vineyards are fully up to speed, Irelan and Schnelle are buying in some fruit, but bottling it separately. Production currently totals just 5,000 cases, with plans to go to 8,000.

"The reason we're doing it that way is because we want to be responsible for the entire process," said Irelan.

The couple is also taking responsibility for the environment, taking a very "green" approach in the winery facility they're currently building. Rocks from the property are being recycled and only local materials are being used, to reduce the carbon footprint. Geothermal heating and argon-filled glass window panes are being used to maximize energy efficiency. Construction is slated to be complete in time for this year's harvest.

Irelan and Schnelle have high hopes for the region and see its enormous potential. With their more exacting and precise approach, they should help cast a new light on the region.