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The Pour

Deep Lakes, Icy Climate, Great Wine

By ERIC ASIMOV

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THE rain was falling again in the Finger Lakes, just as it had for much of September. The incessant precipitation was causing anguish as grape growers across the region weighed harvesting before optimal ripeness or risking the rot and mold that might come with waiting.

“This is a year that’s going to challenge everybody,” said John Martini, who owns Anthony Road Wine Company, on the shore of Seneca lake outside this village. The difficult climate, combined with a diverse combination of soils, makes the Finger Lakes one of the most unusual American wine regions. In the last decade or so, it has begun to show its enormous potential, as a small but growing number of producers makes graceful wines that stand in contrast to prevailing styles from the West Coast.

Fortuitously, the region hitched itself to riesling just as, in the last 10 years, riesling skyrocketed in popularity in the United States. Nowadays, top producers are not simply making good Finger Lakes rieslings, or good American rieslings. They are making seriously good world-class rieslings, in a multitude of styles.

Ravines Wine Cellars, one of the best producers, makes a wonderful dry riesling. I drank a 2009 and liked it so much that I bought a case, for just \$14 a bottle. Ravines also makes a superb riesling from the Argetsinger Vineyard above the east bank of Seneca Lake. The lakes, deep claw marks left in the earth of west-central New York by glaciers moving south from the Hudson Bay, are as much a part of the winemaking culture here as tough vintages like 2001. The great depth of their waters nudges this otherwise inhospitable region to a level of bare tolerance for the fine wine grapes planted on the lakes’ slopes. In winter, the lakes almost never freeze, moderating harsh cold to protect the dormant vines, while in summer they air-condition the vineyards.

“The whole cool-climate viticulture thing is lacking on

the American wine scene,” said Morten Hallgren, the winemaker and owner of Ravines with his wife, Lisa. “It shows a bright future for the Finger Lakes.”

Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard, one of the older and best known names from the Finger Lakes, makes a completely different style of riesling. Instead of the mineral and floral qualities of the Ravines, the Weimer Dry Riesling is brightly fruity. The winery’s Late Harvest riesling is beautifully rendered in the German spätlese style, with apparent sweetness, but with such lively acidity that the wine is thoroughly refreshing, and just about 9 percent alcohol.

Since 2007, Fred Merwarth, the young winemaker who acquired Wiemer when Mr. Wiemer retired, has also made excellent single-vineyard rieslings that show off the identities of the different sites. Making such wines, though, requires risks in the dicey weather.

“You can harvest early and settle for mediocre, or be a little patient and have something special,” Mr. Merwarth said.

One risk in wet weather is mold. It can turn grapes rotten, but in the form of botrytis, the noble rot, it can also amplify the grapes’ innate sweetness.

The triumph of Finger Lakes riesling is a recent phenomenon, given the long history of grape-growing in the area. Plantings of vines in the region took off in the 19th century, but most were either native grapes like concord and catawba, or French-American hybrids like cayuga, rather than vinifera grapes, which originated in the Old World and account for almost all of the world’s fine wines.

Not until the 1950s, when Konstantin Frank, a refugee from Ukraine, arrived in the Finger Lakes and started his Vinifera Wine Cellars, did a concerted effort begin to

demonstrate that vinifera grapes could grow in the cool, wet climate. Dr. Frank planted dozens of grape varieties to see which would thrive. But it was Mr. Wiemer, in the 1970s and '80s, who insisted on emphasizing riesling.

“At the time, his dogmatic view that riesling was the answer looked foolhardy,” said Evan Dawson, whose excellent book, “Summer in a Glass: The Coming of Age of Winemaking in the Finger Lakes,” was published earlier this year by Sterling Epicure. “People were slow to follow, but 15 to 20 years later they realized he was right.”

Still, fewer than 800 acres in the Finger Lakes region are planted with riesling, according to the Cornell Cooperative Extension. Even today, hybrids in the region (including vignoles, seyval blanc and aurore) far outnumber vinifera grapes, and more concord is planted than anything else, destined for grape juice or sweet kosher wines.

For years, the Finger Lakes wine industry was dominated by big companies that made inexpensive hybrid wines, along with smaller wineries that did most of their business selling hybrid wines out of their tasting rooms.

“It’s always been heavily dependent on walk-in traffic: tourists, accidental tourists, people who don’t know much about wine,” said David B. Whiting, an owner of Red Newt Cellars, which he founded in Hector, N.Y., on Seneca Lake, with his wife, Debra, in 1998. “Even small wineries are apt to see 30,000 visitors a year, and a lot of production is tailored to people who like those sweet wines.”

The continuing hold of the hybrid market has caused some tension, as some leading vinifera producers believe that the reputation of the region has been held down.

“I hope people will think of riesling when they think of the Finger Lakes, but it’s really hard,” said Mr. Hallgren of Ravines.

Still, Ravines, like many other Finger Lakes vinifera producers, does make and sell hybrid wines. Mr. Martini and others call them debt-paying wines because they are cheap to produce, easy to sell and help to finance their more ambitious projects.

While riesling has clearly been identified as the top white wine, no consensus exists on what will be the leading red. Some wineries, like Heart and Hands Wine Company near Aurora on the east side of Cayuga Lake, are making pinot noir their signature. Just last year, Heart and Hands, founded in 2006 by Tom and Susan Higgins, planted its own pinot noir grapes on a limestone escarpment overlooking the lake. Meanwhile, it is making superb wines from purchased grapes.

Some here see pinot noir as too risky, a fickle grape that will be subject to wild stylistic swings because of the inconsistent weather, confusing consumers. The Higginses do not agree. “To us,” Ms. Higgins said, “pinot just needs a little more love.” Mr. Higgins added, “In a cooler vintage, we can bump up the sparkling wine production.”

Red Tail Ridge Winery, just north of Anthony Road on Seneca Lake, is also making a lovely pinot noir, its freshness and delicacy a far cry from the heavier, more plushly fruity style common in West Coast pinot noirs.

“It’s not necessarily a mainstream style, but we didn’t really do this to be mainstream,” said Nancy Irelan, who, with her husband, Michael Schnelle, founded Red Tail Ridge in 2004.

Ms. Irelan knows mainstream: She was a researcher for Gallo in California for 12 years, collaborating with scientists at, among other places, Cornell University and the United States Agriculture Department facility in Geneva, N.Y., on the north end of Seneca Lake. There, she said, she could see the potential of the Finger Lakes.

Ms. Irelan continues her experimenting at Red Tail Ridge. Along with riesling and pinot noir, she has planted dornfelder, a German red grape, and teroldego, a red from the Trentino region of Italy. The teroldego is superb, spicy, pretty and fresh. Surprisingly, she also makes an even better sparkling teroldego, like a good lambrusco.

Other wineries are focusing instead on cabernet franc, made in the juicy and spicy Loire Valley mode rather than the more powerful Bordeaux style.

“We need certain grapes for people to associate with the

Finger Lakes,” Mr. Hallgren said. “Personal preferences aside, I think it’s clearly riesling and cabernet franc. It’s much more forgiving and consistent. Pinot noir is just a challenge in the vineyards and the winery.”

Kim Engle and Debra Bermingham, a husband-and-wife team who own Bloomer Creek Vineyard on the east side of Seneca Lake, make some very good rieslings, but their cabernet francs are deliciously fragrant, peppery wines.

Mr. Engle has the absent-minded air of a hippie amateur, but he is a skillful professional who says he was influenced by the natural winemakers of the Loire Valley. More than most in the Finger Lakes, he takes their methods to heart, inducing fermentation with ambient yeasts and refusing to manipulate the acid or sugar content of the wines.

“If there’s a hard way to do things, that’s what we do,” he said.

As good as the top Finger Lakes wines are now, it’s clear that producers still have plenty of room for improvement. Yields for both whites and red grapes are often high; lower yields would increase complexity. And for white grapes, machine harvesting is the general rule, with exceptions like Ravines and Wiemer. It is cheaper and easier than harvesting by hand, but it gives wine-makers less control over the quality of grapes that go into the wine.

“You can tell it’s a region that’s got flaws and warts,” said Mr. Dawson, the writer, “but it’s a region that’s very aware of that, and it’s a region that refuses to accept that the current best is anything but one step in a long journey.”

Distinctive Wines From an Unusual Region

THESE are among my favorite wines from the producers I visited on a recent trip to the Finger Lakes. Some are made in small quantities and must be ordered directly from the wineries, most of which will ship in state and, where legal, out of state. Leading New York City retail shops with good Finger Lakes selections include Astor Wines and Spirits, Garnet Wines and Union Square Wines. Other Finger Lakes producers worth looking for include Heron Hill, Standing Stone, Keuka Lake, Shaw, Fox Run and Dr. Konstantin Frank.

ANTHONY ROAD makes a wide range of wines including fine dry rieslings and harmonious cabernet francs. Most striking is the 2008 Martini-Reinhardt Selection Riesling Trockenbeeren, an unctuous, complex, gloriously rich and balanced sweet wine that is also very dear, at \$100 for a half-bottle.

BLOOMER CREEK is one of the more experimental, idiosyncratic wineries in the Finger Lakes. I very much like the Tanzen Dame rieslings, the White Horse red, a Meritage blend, and especially the juicy, peppery cabernet francs (\$26).

HEART AND HANDS specializes in pinot noir. Its whole-cluster Barrel Reserves are elegant, graceful and complex (\$40).

HERMANN J. WIEMER is a historic Finger Lakes producer making superb rieslings, more fruity than mineral, and cabernet francs. Most striking are the single-vineyard dry rieslings (\$39), the spätlese-style Late Harvest riesling (\$23) and the deep, spicy, structured cabernet franc Reserve (\$28).

RAVINES makes superb rieslings from purchased grapes. The 2009 Finger Lakes (\$15) is richly textured with floral, mineral aromas. The 2008 Argetsinger Vineyard riesling is deeper, more intense and will age well (\$33). Also, juicy, refreshing cabernet francs (\$20) and dense, complex Meritage blends (\$25).

RED NEWT makes a wide range of aromatic whites and reds. The 2008 Dry Riesling Reserve (\$22) is particularly pleasing.

RED TAIL RIDGE produces small amounts of wines made from some obscure grapes like teroldego and blaufränkisch, all worth trying, along with very good dry (\$19) and semi-dry (\$16) rieslings, and floral, delicate pinot noirs (\$20).