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Tasting the Finger Lakes

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THE “new riesling kingdom”? According to experts at the French wine magazine “La Vigne,” it doesn’t carry a German or Austrian ZIP code.

In fact, the recently anointed little fiefdom of fine wine that edged out these countries at the highly competitive Rieslings du Monde competition in Strasbourg — picking up three gold and three silver medals — is just a five-hour drive from Manhattan — in the Finger Lakes.

I headed north to sample these award-winning wines at their source, starting with Dr. Konstantin Frank, whose 2008 Bunch Select Late Harvest Riesling was one of the gold medalists. The venerable Dr. Frank’s winery is situated high above scenic Keuka Lake, near the quaint village of Hammondsport.

The late Dr. Frank, who hailed from Ukraine, brought over European varietals in the 1950s and successfully married these older, foreign vines with hardy wild ones to produce some of the area’s most well-regarded wines.

The cellar’s history is traced in the black-and-white photos lining the wood-paneled walls of the tasting room, which offers commanding views of the lake below. (A newer, larger tasting room is next door.) I began with the 2008 and 2009 dry and semi-dry Dr. Konstantin Frank Rieslings (the winery also has a more affordable line called Salmon Run); both were minerally, slightly acidic and perfect for summer (and a bargain at \$14.99). A little-known rkatsiteli caught my eye; rarely grown outside Russia and Eastern Europe, this grape produces a wine that is similar to a gewurztraminer — slightly sweet with a spicy finish. It’s developed something of a cult following, and at \$17.99, is worth buying, if only as a conversation starter at your next barbecue.

Last, I sampled several sparkling wines produced under the Chateau Frank label: the 2002 Blanc de Noirs (\$29.99), a pleasant blend of pinot noir and pinot meunier, and my favorite, the Celebre (\$19.99), made from 100-percent riesling, fairly rare for a sparkling wine. Another rarity, Dr. Frank’s doesn’t charge for tastings:

“We like to reward the folks who have found us,” says the winery’s third-generation owner, Fred Frank.

Just down the road, but a far cry from the sedate scene at Dr. Frank, the Heron Hill winery was all abuzz.

This big, Napa-like destination winery produces a whole lot of varieties (22 bottles under six different lines), which you can sample in the enormous, barrel-shaped tasting room (\$2 for five classic wines; \$5 for six premium wines). There’s also a bustling gift shop — “Born to Swirl” T-shirts, wine-related paraphernalia — an outdoor café and a large, tented area with live concerts every Sunday during the summer and fall. Over lunch on the sunny patio of the Blue Heron Café, overlooking rolling fields covered in vines, I sampled all six of Heron Hill’s rieslings (as well as a riesling ice wine that is currently sold out).

The semi-dry styles are their most popular, with a very pronounced mineral flavor (from my seat, I could see the shale jutting out of the hills). But it was the 2008 unoaked chardonnay under the connoisseur Ingle Vineyard label that was a true revelation. For those who loathe the buttery, oaky California-style chardonnays, this crisp, clean, almost clear wine will change your mind (and at \$14.99, won’t hurt your wallet), but with only 500 cases made, it’s difficult to find outside of the winery.

Next, a 30-minute drive over to the west bank of Seneca Lake to visit the Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard.

Noted expert Robert Parker has rated it four stars, and Wiemer’s rieslings regularly top the list of Wine Spectator magazine. Carved out of a renovated barn, with a soaring white-painted interior that resembles a church, this is the Bergdorf Goodman of Finger Lakes tasting rooms (well-crafted, traditional wines, a slightly intimidating vibe).

Tasting fees are comparable to Heron Hill (\$3 and \$5), but you also can spend \$10 and try some of their reserve selections, which include a sparkling 2003 blanc de noir (\$26) and a reserve dry riesling (\$25). Wiemer’s regular dry and semi-dry rieslings (\$17) are acclaimed and certainly deserve their notices, but I was more drawn to the winery’s Frost Cuvee, a blend of riesling and gewurtztraminer grapes with a touch of pinot noir and chardonnay.

The slightly off-dry wine would be great with spicy food, and at just \$12 a bottle, it’s wonderfully affordable.

My final stop was Lucas Vineyards, Cayuga Lake’s oldest winery, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year.

The Lucas family, who still run the show, created for the occasion an extra-dry sparkling wine made from local Cayuga grapes — the taste is light, slightly acidic and quite refreshing (\$19.99).

Soaking up the winery’s comfortable, farm-like setting, I also savored the Lucas family’s picks for its favorite summer wines, including a superb just-released 2010 single-vineyard reserve riesling and a 2009 dry rosé — small-batch wines that you can only get here in the Finger Lakes. Having given both my wine palate and odometer a workout (responsibly, of course), I returned home inspired. The next time someone goes off half-cocked about the immaturity of New York State

wines, I'll know exactly how to shut them up.

Info fingerlakes.org

Lowdown

Go: The drive to the Finger Lakes region takes about 4 hours and 45 minutes.

Stay: The Harbor Hotel in Watkins Glen is close to the Seneca, Cayuga and Keuka Wine Trails. The rooms are spacious and the breakfast, on the patio overlooking Seneca Lake, is divine (from \$189; watkinsglenharborhotel.com).

You can't get much closer to a winery than at the Inn at Glenora, a 30-room hotel on the grounds of Glenora Wine Cellars, Seneca Lake's oldest winery. Both the rooms and the inn's gourmet Veraisons Restaurant offer spectacular lake views from on high (from \$99, Sun. to Thurs. through June; glenora.com).

Info: fingerlakes.org

DRINK UP! 5 more ways to uncork New York

From Lake Erie to the North Fork, here are five wonderful local wines for summer.

- 1) Wolffer Estate 2009 Rosé**, North Fork, \$17. Made in the Austrian style, this crisp, dry, light-pink wine pairs well with seafood, which is a good thing, since the vineyard is just a few miles from the Atlantic in Sagaponack. On Fridays starting at 5 p.m., enjoy free live music and a free sunset with your vino (wolffer.com).
- 2) Channing Daughters 2009 Rosato di Merlot**, South Fork, \$17. Rosé lovers rejoice! This acclaimed South Fork winery offers a series of four pretty pink bottles. This one, from North Fork grapes, is a crisp, dry stunner, best served ice cold. Their Bridgehampton tasting room is open every day, with six different wines available for sampling. (channingdaughters.com).
- 3) Freedom Run 2007 Estate Pinot Noir**, Niagara County, \$25. Want a red that goes great with summer? This limited-edition label is one of our top picks from the increasingly interesting wine region on the New York side of the Niagara River, just a few short miles from some of Canada's top wineries. Satisfyingly smooth and spicy, this is one of a whole bunch of reds from Lake Ontario (both sides of the border) that we wish more New Yorkers would have the chance to taste (freedomrunwinery.com).
- 4) Borghese 2009 Sauvignon Blanc Estate**, North Fork, \$22. It wouldn't be summer without a classic dry white, like this herbaceous, citrusy one from the North Fork that features a nice, lemony finish. You can't miss this Cutchogue winery — just look for the vintage truck and the sign painted on old barrels (castellodiborghese.com).
- 5) Johnson Estate Freeling Creek Dry Rose**, Lake Erie, \$12. Tempered by a slightly fruity finish, this deep pink rosé from far Western New York is a blend of merlot and the relatively unknown Marechal Foch, a hybrid variety that has a taste similar to pinot noir. So what if you have to almost drive to Ohio to get to the winery (johnsonwinery.com).

With David Landsel