

Dr. Frank's Vinifera Wine Cellars, known for its Riesling, is one of the Finger Lakes' most esteemed wineries.



IN A NEW YORK MOMENT

Empire State Wines Rise in Quality, Interest—and Sales

BY ALIA AKKAM

In April, Kelly Urbanik, winemaker of Macari Vineyards on Long Island's North Fork, headed west to Williamsburg to pour Merlots and Sauvignon Blancs and discuss the winery's sustainability initiatives to a throng of curious oenophiles. The evening was the latest installment of Brooklyn Winery's New York State Winemaker Series, created to introduce New York-made wines—and the stories and people behind them—to city residents. "We are a New York winery; it is our responsibility to support New York winemaking. A night here brings these winemakers to a market they might not have been able to access before," shares Brooklyn Winery co-founder Brian Leventhal.

While it may not grow its own fruit, full-fledged Brooklyn Winery is a place where customers can partake in hands-on harvest sessions with winemaker Conor McCormack using New York State grapes, like the Riesling from Nutt Road Vineyard in the Finger Lakes ready for release this month. "Conor, who is from California, was blown away by the quality of the fruit," says Leventhal.

McCormack is not the only one. While New York wines may not have the clout and wide distribution of, its Califor-

nia counterparts for example, recent figures from the New York Wine & Grape Foundation show that America's number three grape and wine producer is making strides: Throughout the state's five major wine regions, 180 million bottles are produced annually. From 2000 to 2010, 187 new wineries opened—more than in the previous 170 years. So what's propelling this growth?

World-Class Quality

The establishment of Hargrave Vineyard on the North Fork in 1973 spawned Long Island's now lucrative wine industry. Pioneers like Pindar and Lenz followed, realizing the potential of local vineyards set in microclimates akin to Bordeaux. Now, 30 years later, buoyed by tourism, tasting rooms across the North and South Forks are packed with customers trying the likes of Peconic Bay's Nautique Esprit de Rose or Channing Daughters' Sculpture Garden blend; others sip bubbly while listening to live jazz at Sparkling Pointe, or scope out the artwork at Bedell Cellars while waiting for a pour from the Taste series.

Longtime winemaker at Wölffer Estate in Sagaponack, and founder of The Grapes of Roth, Roman Roth is quick to note these glamorous settings would be moot if there wasn't quality to back it up: "New York is one of the toughest markets in the world. If you don't have quality you get crucified." A heavy contingent of Tri-State and Florida consumers clamoring for Wölffer wines—the winery produces about 22,000 cases annually—attests to this must-have quality.

Winemaker Kareem Massoud's parents, Charles and Ursula, originally



wanted to start a silk-worm farm in Beirut, but read about the Hargraves and decided to tweak their goal to establish Paumanok Vineyards on the promising East End instead. Now, Paumanok is known for its Chenin Blanc, the only one made in New York, and a Cabernet Sauvignon that thrives in vineyards further west than most other Long Island wineries. Massoud explains, "It's a very exciting time to be a wine producer on the East End. We're still a young region, but now we have vines averaging 25-30 years old that are creating wines of greater complexity."

Up in the Finger Lakes, Morgen McLaughlin, president of the Finger Lakes Wine Country Tourism Marketing Association, has seen her region's wines,

primarily Rieslings, gain wider recognition, too, finally acquiring coveted 90-point ratings. "As much as you don't want to emphasize scores, for a region like us, it shows people are finally recognizing our good wines. It's helped a number of wineries with more national distribution, which has been one of the big barriers to exposure," she says.

The Hudson Valley may be New York's oldest winemaking region, but it's certainly been overshadowed by Long Island and the Finger Lakes in the past. Brotherhood in Washingtonville, America's oldest winery, proves that Hudson Valley wines are

ready to be taken to new levels. Brotherhood, and other wineries like Whitecliff and Millbrook, are local favorites for good reason: their quality. Carlo DeVito of Hudson-Chatham Winery, who launched the New York Wine Council to help promote wines from the region to consumers and trade, thinks that's about to change. "The Hudson Valley is home to some of the best cassis made anywhere in the U.S. or Canada. It has a unique relationship with the fruit, which produces an intense dessert wine that has a found a solid fan base in the Valley." In addition to

Hudson-Chatham, he points to wineries like Clinton, Brookview Station and Tousey for helping shine a light on these artisanal cult wines from the region.

"The best wines," he continues, "especially the reds, seem, more and more, to be Burgundian in style." DeVito thinks this is helping the Valley forge its true



Baco Noir, like this one from Hudson-Chatham Winery, is helping the Hudson Valley become synonymous with soft red wines.

left: The Inn at Glenora – popular accommodations among visitors packing Finger Lakes wine trails;
right: New York City residents can discover local wines during Brooklyn Winery's New York State Winemaker Series.



right: Scenic Millbrook has helped put the Hudson Valley on the map with its wines; **below:** Longtime Wölffer Estate winemaker Roman Roth, also of The Grapes of Roth, sees Long Island tasting rooms filled with a younger, more curious demographic.

NEW YORK STATE WINES APPEAL TO NON-NEW YORKERS, TOO, FOR TASTE PROFILES SIMILAR TO EUROPEAN VARIETIES—AT A GREAT VALUE.

identity: “I have talked to several growers, and I can tell you that myself and others are leaning towards plantings of Gamay Noir, more Baco Noir and Pinot Noir. If one is looking to find out what the *terroir* of the Valley is, it is to make soft, approachable reds.”

Educated Customers

McLaughlin says that in the Finger Lakes, wineries have focused on tasting room sales, and there is a need to expand to new markets. Well-regarded wineries like Dr. Frank’s and Red Newt may be pivotal in building awareness of the region’s stellar Rieslings, but as McLaughlin points out, “We don’t have one big, recognized brand with big volume; even Dr. Frank is just 40,000 cases. It’s hard for these wineries to promote.” Getting wines into the hands of retailers, sommeliers and ultimately consumers becomes essential then.

Kevin Faehndrich’s mission is to do just that. After moving to the Finger Lakes to attend Ithaca College, he fell in love with the area, eventually becoming assistant winemaker at Thirsty Owl. But on his visits back to NYC, the lack of Finger Lakes wines available frustrated him. This motivated him to debut Upstate Wine Co. last year, dedicated to the

placement of Finger Lakes wines in New York City accounts. The portfolio has expanded to nine different brands, from Fulkerson to Chateau Lafayette Renau to Fox Run, that now have representation in 60 on- and off-premise locations throughout the city. Popular restaurants like Blue Hill and Cookshop are big supporters, and Faehndrich says that as product “moves out the door,” sommeliers realize there’s a desire to try these wines: “Our Rieslings are hands down world-class wines. If that was all we could do that would be fine, but what about Gewurztraminer, Pinot Gris and Chardonnay that are consistent and pair well with food? Educating about style is huge, which we do through tastings and winemaker dinners.”

At the recent Brooklyn Uncorked event at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, for example, guests shelled out \$40 to sip Long Island wines paired with samples from local, farm-driven restaurants. Undoubtedly, today’s wine drinker wants something new in their glass, which bodes well for New York State.

“Wine is such an important part of daily conversation now,” says Wölffer’s Roth. “In the past you were either a wine geek or you weren’t interested. Now wine drinkers are enthusiastic and game to taste without any preconceived notion; they don’t have tons of bottles in their cellars.”

And because these enthusiastic customers are not beholden to a massive collection in their wine fridge, they are more open to experimentation. At The Wine Room in Williamsville, NY, owner Neil Kratzer stocks his store with eclectic, “what I think are well-made, higher quality wines” from New York State, ranging from Miles Wine Cellars and Ventosa Vineyards in the Finger Lakes to Thou-



sand Islands Winery in Alexandria Bay and Niagara Landing Wine Cellars, a stop on the Niagara Wine Trail.

“These are dry, food-friendly wines. New Yorkers have to look at them from a European perspective, not Californian. It’s easier for me to get a late-twentysomething to try New York wines than the 50-year-old ones who are scared they will be too sweet,” Kratzer notes. “New York State has done a good job of creating a wine industry, and now we have to let our local customers know they are as good as they are and drink what’s in their backyard. If you are buying New York wines, that money stays in New York. A lot of the socially-conscious consumers are realizing that right now.”

Accessibility

In New York City, guests can drink Grand Cru Sauvignon Blanc from Long Island’s Raphael Vineyard straight from the tap at Vesta; at Red Rooster, they might spring for Finger Lakes Riesling courtesy of the kegged Gotham Project.

Paumanok’s Massoud is also thrilled about the trend of wines on tap not only for its accessibility but its sustainability aspect: “Instead of bottles you’re reusing a stainless steel keg thousands of times. But everything revolves around quality; it’s a gain we wouldn’t have made if there was a loss.”

At Luce + Hawkins at the Jedediah Hawkins Inn in Jamesport, chef and co-owner Keith Luce extends the tasting room experience with his on-site wine keg system. “We’ve learned that it made



right: At Luce + Hawkins in Jamesport, a local-driven wine list extends the tasting room experience for guests; **below:** Fresh blueberries from the farm transform into striking fruit wine at Vizcarra Vineyards on the Niagara Wine Trail.

local wines more approachable to people, and moved a tremendous amount. We've helped turn some people onto local wines they might have never tried," he notes.

Beyond the kegs, Luce has also reorganized the wine list, with one side delineating "US" to include all New York wines, and another "THEM" for those diners who simply can't do without a glass of California Cabernet.

A spike in sommelier interest is a natural boon for exposing New York wines to new audiences. Massoud is thrilled that popular restaurants like Má Pêche, Dressler, Ilili and Gramercy Tavern are serving Paumanok wines throughout trendsetting Brooklyn and Manhattan.

Tom Gannon, sommelier at Rothmann's Steakhouse in New York City since 2002—except for a year off for a stint at Atlantic Wines & Spirits—has brought Finger Lakes wines into the spotlight with tastings he's organized the past few years. "Finger Lakes wines didn't really have a presence in the city," he recalls. "Guests would say they like Shinn, and I'd say 'Not Long Island wines, what about Finger Lakes wines?,'" he explains. "One of the things I really like about the region is that there is a price-quality ratio that is attractive to buyers both on- and off-premise. A lot more people are willing to take a chance on wine if there's value." His revamped wine list reflects this with a New York-only section that nods to Finger Lakes wineries including Anthony Road, Heart & Hands and Hermann J. Wiemer. While the strength of Finger Lakes Riesling is an asset, it also requires a solid education on behalf of the sommelier: "When you suggest a Riesling to guests and think it will be too sweet, you have to explain it's vinified in a different style."

Tourism Appeal

Ron Goerler, Jr., general manager of Jamesport Vineyards, and president of the Long Island Wine Council, has witnessed the growth of Long Island wines firsthand,



having worked on the property since his father founded it in 1981. The success of the winery's Estate and East End Series, as well as the region overall, are built on quality, he says. And, customers from afar are realizing this. "Look how long it took San Francisco to recognize Napa," he points out. "Long Island's beaches, farms and restaurants have finally come to a head. People now visit from New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts and down south."

Luce + Hawkins was slammed during the harvest last year, and for Luce, his packed dining room signaled good news for the East End: "When you have that critical mass descending upon a region, there's no question it's had time to mature and reflects better winemaking and *terroir*."

Tourism might just be the link to gaining exposure of different regions. While the state's three main wine-producing regions are sharing buzz, other burgeoning centers like Lake Erie and Niagara Escarpment have even more work cut out for them. In Lake Erie, Johnson, New York's oldest estate winery, sets itself apart with specialties including Chambourcin ice wine and Concord. Vizcarra Vineyards in the Niagara Escarpment is hoping tourism

will lead more consumers to learn about its distinct fruit wines. "When we opened Vizcarra in 2004, our wine trail had just two wineries; now we have 15," says Melinda Vizcarra, who opened the winery with her husband Oscar, now president of the Niagara Region Wine Trail Association. The family uses its bounty of fruits—apples, cherries, blueberries—grown on its own adjacent Becker Farms to make wine, and volume has grown each year since. "We're just 30 miles from Niagara Falls. We're trying to educate visitors to come out, drive the countryside and stay another day once they've seen the them," shares Vizcarra.

As growing culinary trends dictate, visitors are more likely to stay a bit longer in each of New York's dynamic wine regions. More socially-conscious consumers are building their vacations around locally-made food and drink, and wineries, once stops for leisurely afternoons, have become focal attractions. DeVito thinks this growing interest is one of the Hudson Valley's biggest assets, boldly singling out its idyllic surroundings and culinary culture as more reasons to compare it to Burgundy: "If one needs to examine the successes of the Valley one needs to look no further than the little rock walls and hedgerows. Have a nice wedge of Hudson Red, some fresh, hardy bread from Our Daily Bread in Chatham, an apple from any one of the Valley's apple farms like Golden Harvest and a bottle of soft red wine, and see why the future of the Hudson Valley lies somewhere near the Côte-d'Or." ■