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# Fantastic Finger Lakes Finds

Recent tastings from this upstate New York region unearth a widening array of producers crafting a diversity of fine wines.

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Some of the most exciting Rieslings in the United States hail from the little-known Finger Lakes region in upstate New York. Over the years, consistent, high-quality producers in the region, like Hermann J. Wiemer, Dr. Konstantin Frank, Ravines, Fox Run, Sheldrake Point and Red Newt have lead the way.

Recent vintages from the Finger Lakes demonstrate that the circle of quality winemaking is expanding to include a wide array of producers, grape varieties and wine styles. Not only are the Finger Lakes knocking it out of the park with Rieslings (from bone dry to dessert style), they're turning heads with some surprisingly delicious Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer and red wines. Bottlings previously known to be good are getting even better, becoming more nuanced and increasingly reflective of both terroir and the winemakers.

"The region has changed tremendously," says Johannes Reinhardt, the German-born winemaker at Anthony Road Vineyard who left his own generations-old winery in Germany 13 years ago to make wines in the Finger Lakes. "The increase of quality has been really tremendous, but it will keep going. We constantly push each other, and encourage each other to create more expressive, more exciting wines."

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"There's room for everybody here," echoes Bernard Cannac, the Bordeaux-educated winemaker at Heron Hill, regarding the hundred or so small, mostly family-run wineries that circle the spindly, glacial lakes of the region. "Our diversity, and a choice to focus on quality over quantity—those are our strong points."

**Best New Dry Rieslings:**

90 Keuka Lake Vineyards 2011 Estate Grown and Bottled Falling Man Vineyard Dry Riesling (Finger Lakes).

abv: 11.5% Price: \$30

For those seeking dry-style Rieslings with little perceivable residual sugar, the Finger Lakes offer a number of excellent options from producers like Ravines, Tierce and Red Tail Ridge. While dramatically dry and steely, Keuka Lake Vineyards's Rieslings stand out in a line-up for their intensely rich, fleshy grapefruit and mineral tones.

Owner Melvin Goldman attributes the winery's style to guidance from his original winemaker, Morton Hallgren—now owner and winemaker of Ravines.

"The dry style brings out the real characteristics of the soil and fruit in our wines," Goldman says. "Plus we make our wines to drink wines with food."

While his wines are remarkably complex, when asked about his winemaking philosophy, Goldman insists, "It's all about benign neglect." The wines that he and consulting winemaker Staci Nugent create are "wines made in the vineyard," he says. "We focus on getting the best quality fruit, and then we wait. We don't get impatient. The winemaker's principle job is to make sure that these grapes get the best possible treatment."



**Other Recommended Dry Rieslings:**

90 Ravines 2011 Dry Riesling (Finger Lakes).

abv: 12.5% Price: \$17

90 Tierce 2010 Dry Riesling (Finger Lakes).

abv: 12.2% Price: \$30

**89 Red Tail Ridge 2011 RTR Vineyard Dry Riesling (Finger Lakes).**

abv: 12% Price: \$19



**Best New Off-Dry Rieslings:**

90 Shaw 2008 Riesling (Finger Lakes).

abv: 12% Price: \$17

The cool, northerly climate, intense sunshine and warming lake effect found throughout the Finger Lakes region highlight the most extreme expressions of the Riesling grape. Off-dry Finger Lakes Rieslings are often voluptuous with sweet, ripe stone fruit and even tropical fruit flavors, honed by steely streaks of acid and minerality. Shaw Vineyard's texturally fascinating 2008 Riesling, released just last year, is an unusual glimpse into how deliciously age-worthy these wines can be.

"Finger Lakes Riesling is not necessarily a wine that needs to be hurried or consumed within the first year or two of its post-harvest life," says owner and winemaker Steve Shaw. Known in the region for unorthodox grape growing and late harvests (often one to three weeks later than his neighbors), Shaw's 2008 Riesling grapes were picked the last week of October, and nurtured over fine lees (the delicate sediment left over from fermentation) for three years to build texture, mouthfeel and complexity.

"Winemaking for me is not to be hurried, and that is why I have gone to great lengths to slow the whole process down," Shaw says.

Shaw attributes the success of wines to his land and devotion to sustainable grape growing, not his winemaking. "I know everyone's using that word 'terroir', but honestly, I really like the ground I own," he says. "[His 2008 Riesling] ...is a unique Finger Lakes Riesling with a true connection to the land it was grown on, and that year's growing conditions."

**Other Recommended Off-Dry Rieslings:**

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90 Lamoreaux Landing 2011 Red Oak Vineyard Riesling (Finger Lakes).

abv: 12.1% Price: \$20

90 Bloomer Creek 2010 Tanzen Dame Morehouse Road Vineyard 2nd Harvest VS Dry Riesling (Finger Lakes).

abv: 12% Price: \$34

90 Red Newt Cellars 2011 Circle Riesling (Finger Lakes). *Best Buy.*

abv: 11% Price: \$12

#### Best Sweeter-style Rieslings:

91 Anthony Road 2009 Martini Reinhardt Selection Riesling (Finger Lakes).

abv: 8.9% Price: \$30

On the sweeter end of the scale, Finger Lakes Rieslings can sway from intensely fruity but brisk semisweet wines, to unctuously honeyed dessert wines with hints of marmalade and wax. Intensely lavish in texture, with penetrating fruit and minerality, yet almost lacy on the palate, Anthony Road's 2009 Martini Reinhardt Selection is a stellar spätlese-style Riesling made by the German-trained Johannes Reinhardt.

Reinhardt makes a variety of Rieslings, from austere, dry wines to decadent trockenbeerenauslese-style dessert wines inspired by his homeland. Yet the 2009 Martini Reinhardt Selection, which clocks in at a dainty 8.9% abv, is an anomaly.



The 2009 vintage was a cool, wet growing season in the Finger Lakes, but according to Reinhardt, the Martini Vineyard, from which this bottling was sourced, ripened spectacularly that year. "We can't explain why they turned out the way they did," he says. "Nature's hand is involved, and you can't pinpoint all the reasons. But with such high amounts of natural acidity, and enough fruit and sweetness to stand up to it, this was crying to be a lower alcohol style."

"It's the first time I've [had] such a low level of alcohol," Reinhardt says, "but I like the marriage of sweetness and acidity, along with the weight of the palate."

When asked if he will attempt to recreate this style in coming vintages, he demurs. "If the growing year is giving me something that should be expressed a certain way, I won't hesitate to do so. But I hesitate to copy the same style every year. I see myself as more of an artist," he says jokingly, "Picasso wouldn't paint a picture twice. You'll see his style, of course, and if you know his work, you just know it's a Picasso."

#### Other Recommended Sweet Rieslings:

91 Sheldrake Point 2010 Ice Wine Riesling (Finger Lakes). *Editor's Choice.*

abv: 9.1% Price: \$60

90 Dr. Konstantin Frank 2011 Reserve Riesling (Finger Lakes).

abv: 10.5% Price: \$25

90 Fox Run 2010 11 Lake Dana Vineyard Riesling (Finger Lakes).

abv: 8% Price: \$40



#### Best New Pinot Noirs:

89 Heron Hill 2009 Ingle Vineyard Pinot Noir (Finger Lakes).

abv: 12.5% Price: \$20

While Riesling is undeniably king in the Finger Lakes, Pinot Noir is one of the region's most promising red grape varieties. "Pinot is such a delicate, difficult, picky grape to grow," says Bernard Cannac of Heron Hill, "and because the Finger Lakes have such a diversity of vineyard and terroir, [there's a range between]...very good Pinot, and others that are not so great. You can make outstanding Pinot Noir here, it's just a matter of finding that sweet spot."

Born and raised in southern France, where he tended to his family's vineyards, Cannac, like Reinhardt, is part of a

growing community of expatriate Europeans who have taken on the challenge of winemaking in the Finger Lakes.

The strikingly aromatic yet fruity 2009 Ingle Vineyard Pinot Noir was the first harvest Cannac worked following his arrival in the Finger Lakes. "I'd just had the job at Heron Hill for three days, and came up to the region to look for an apartment when harvest started. This Pinot was made in between apartment visits," he says.

Despite the cool 2009 vintage, "Ingle Vineyard Pinot Noir was so low in yield, but very ripe." Briary and crisp, with red plum flavor and granite minerality, the wine is a blend of fruit from two vineyard blocks. "A younger block of 10 year-old Pinot, and an older block that's 30 years old," says Cannac. "Two blocks that give very different wine," but synthesize to combine fruitiness with depth and structure.

#### Other Recommended Pinot Noirs:

89 Bloomer Creek 2009 Vintner's Select Unfiltered & Unfiltered Pinot Noir (Finger Lakes).

abv: 12.7% Price: \$20

89 Damiani 2010 Reserve Davis Vineyards Pinot Noir (Finger Lakes).

abv: 13.9% Price: \$47

88 Shaw 2008 Reserve Pinot Noir (Finger Lakes).

abv: 13% Price: \$30

#### Best New Other Whites:

Photo courtesy Robyn Wishna

90 Bloomer Creek 2010 Block 97

Chardonnay (Finger Lakes).

abv: 12.8% Price: \$22

Beyond Riesling, the Finger Lakes are home to a growing variety of excellent white wines—everything from aromatic Gewürztraminer and Pinot Gris, to some surprisingly delicious Sauvignon Blanc.



Chardonnay has always been an underdog here, but Bloomer Creek's 2010 Block 97—a delicate and lively, yet opulent Chardonnay—is so memorable, it's hard not to make comparisons to Burgundy.

According to Bloomer Creek owner and winemaker, Kim Engle, in the Finger Lakes, "we don't think our Chardonnay is very exciting—that's what a lot of winemakers here say...But if we manage Chardonnay here like we do Pinot Noir [focusing on small crops and nurturing the vines for maximum grape ripeness], I think we can turn out some exciting examples," he says.

While he rebuffs any blatant comparison to Burgundy, Engle certainly doesn't mind having his Chardonnay mistaken for it. He recounts a story of a blind tasting one night with wife and partner, Debra Birmingham, and a few wine industry guests who had brought Chardonnay from Burgundy.

According to Engle, his friends tasted the wines studiously, and finally, one, a highly-respected Manhattan sommelier "pushed the [disguised] Burgundy bottle back, and declared, 'I'm sorry Kim, this is nice wine, but your wine's just not there yet.' Discovering the truth," that the preferred bottle was actually from Bloomer Creek, his friend "was just thrilled to be wrong," Engle says.

Over the years, Engle's approach to Chardonnay has changed dramatically. "I have been steadily working my way away from new oak," he says. "I always thought it was a shame to take beautiful fruit and hide it with new oak. The more I could move away from that, the more exciting it seemed to be."

"If you taste your fermentation frequently, you witness beautiful melon and apple and pineapple flavors slowly being lost to French oak," he says. "Over the years, I've been walking that line between overwhelming wine with oak and marrying the flavors of the grape itself. The idea is quite simple, but the practice is much more difficult, and it's always going to be a balancing act. Much like the rest of life, I suppose."

#### Other Recommended Whites:

90 Ravines 2010 Sauvignon Blanc (Finger Lakes). *Editors' Choice.*

abv: 12% Price: \$18

89 Dr. Konstantin Frank 2010 Pinot Gris (Finger Lakes).

abv: 12.5% Price: \$15

89 Glenora 2011 Gewürztraminer (Finger Lakes).

abv: 12% Price: \$15

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