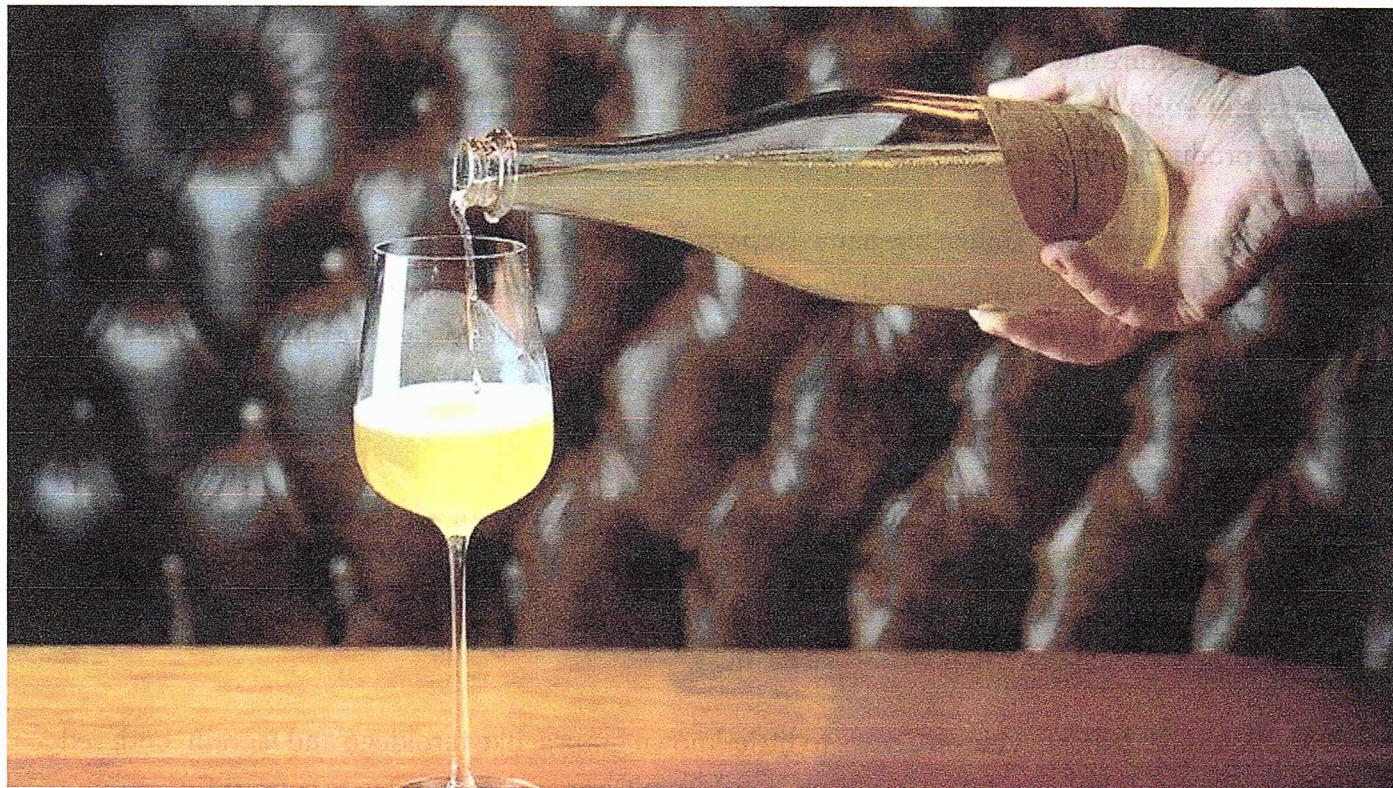


# Drink This: The tiny winery that Chicago sommeliers are loving



A sommelier at Cherry Circle Room pours Red Tail Ridge's pet-nat riesling. (Michelle Kanaar / Chicago Tribune)

By **Joseph Hernandez**

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**A**s a California native, I entered the wine scene assuming the domestic wine market orbited around Napa and Sonoma. Getting my start in wine retail in Chicago, that's a majority of what I sold and drank: cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir and chardonnay. Then I moved to New York, and I learned about the Finger Lakes. An area in Central New York named after the 11 tendril-like lakes carved out by glaciers, it's New York State's most recognized wine region, known for interesting, cool-climate wines.

One such producer, Red Tail Ridge, is slowly trickling into Chicago, with bottles appearing on some of the city's best wine lists. At new West Loop restaurant Bad Hunter, you'll find Red Tail Ridge's Miscreant, a blend of chardonnay and pinot gris that's seen skin-contact — a white wine that drinks unexpectedly like a red. Cherry Circle Room, Beatrix, [RPM Italian](#), Maple & Ash and many others carry Red Tail's refreshing rieslings, chardonnays, sparkling wines and more.



Try it, and you'll become a fan. "It's hard for us to keep (Red Tail) on our lists" because of the demand from the drinkers who have discovered it, says Ryan Arnold, divisional wine director for Lettuce Entertain You restaurants (Beatrix, RPM, Hub51, many more).

The brains behind the winery are winemaker Nancy Irelan and her husband, Mike Schnelle, who spends his days in the vineyards, caring for the grapes. Before launching Red Tail Ridge, Irelan was the vice president of viticulture and enology research and development at E&J Gallo, one of the largest corporate wineries in the world, behind brands like Barefoot Wine, Boone's Farm and Carlo Rossi. Running Red Tail, which produces only a few hundred cases of each wine, is quite the departure.

It's also a departure in style. Unlike big-name Napa and Sonoma wines, which almost formulaically deliver velvety fruit, plush body and heady juiciness, Red Tail Ridge's wines are curious and exciting entities, each with its own personality. As at many Finger Lakes wineries, riesling is a big focus — the grape thrives in the region — but don't expect a sweet, viscous wine. Red Tail's rieslings are decidedly fresh, bright in citrus, flower and melon flavors.

"People weren't taking New York seriously for a while, but there are cool wineries like Red Tail Ridge with a global scope — they're taking risks, being intentional about their winemaking," says Michael McAvena, beverage director, beer and wine, of Heisler Hospitality, which owns Bad Hunter. "They're also consistent from each vintage. Their wines are flawless."

Irelan and Schnelle dedicate vineyard rows to little-known grapes, like teroldego and lagrein, both red grapes from northern Italy, and Blaufrankisch, a red from Germany. And Irelan is constantly experimenting, particularly with red sparkling winemaking techniques, lightly bubbly pet-nat styles and so-called orange wines, made from white grapes thanks to prolonged skin contact, like the Miscreant carried at Bad Hunter. There's little she doesn't try.

"To be able to make so many kinds of wine is stressful and very difficult," Arnold says. "They're incredibly curious farmers — I want to applaud their experimentation."

*Bad Hunter, 802 W. Randolph St., 312-265-1745, [www.badhunter.com](http://www.badhunter.com)*

*Beatrix, multiple locations, [www.beatrixchicago.com](http://www.beatrixchicago.com)*

*Cherry Circle Room, 12 S. Michigan Ave., 312-792-3515, [www.cherrycycleroom.com](http://www.cherrycycleroom.com)*

*Maple & Ash, 8 W. Maple St., 312-944-8888, [www.mapleandash.com](http://www.mapleandash.com)*

*RPM Italian, 52 W. Illinois St., 312-222-1888, [www.rpmitalian.com](http://www.rpmitalian.com)*

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