

NEW YORK STATE

It's taken a few decades of research, trial and some error, but this northeastern state has now found its own identity, home to a range of cooler-climate styles that offer a fascinating and diverse palette of flavours, while majoring on Riesling. **Charles Curtis MW** reports

New York state has found a solution to global warming – at least for wine lovers. Ripeness and alcohol levels are being driven to unprecedented heights by rising temperatures in wine-producing regions around the world. Cool-climate New York, however, is providing a refreshing alternative. Adventurous wine lovers today can find delicious examples of everything from Blaufränkisch to Saperavi and Lagrein from New York.

This new-found confidence demonstrates a maturing wine industry. Over-extracted Merlot and over-oaked Chardonnay are far less

common than they once were. Some 25 years ago, many producers were trying to imitate the high-scoring wines of the Napa Valley in California, but they often had little appeal outside the summer holidays. Today, New York's wines are limpid and pure – and sommeliers are delighted.

The somewhat disappointing nature of the state's early wines was not due to a lack of effort; the history of grape-growing in New York is long. The first vineyards were planted in the 17th century by Dutch settlers who found wild grapevines growing in the Hudson Valley. Native varieties are mostly from the species

Below: Dr Konstantin Frank tasting room, close to the western shores of Keuka Lake

Vitis labrusca and *Vitis riparia*, which include the best-known local grapes Concord and Niagara (often used for juice and jam). They are very cold-hardy and resistant to phylloxera.

'Father of vinifera'

There was little success with European wine-grape varieties (*Vitis vinifera*) until the 1950s and the pioneering work of Dr Konstantin Frank – a Ukrainian viticulturist who emigrated in 1951. Due to the difficulty of growing grapes in New York's climate, vinifera was slow to catch on, even as business boomed for native varieties and hybrids. Fortunately for wine lovers, Dr Frank persisted.

His earliest success was with Riesling. Because of its relative tolerance of cold, the

'We're having a much deeper conversation about sites. It's no longer just "east side of the lake, west side of the lake"'

Oskar Bynke, Hermann J Wiemer

variety is a natural fit for the New York climate with its harsh winters. Riesling also does well in the shale soils of the Finger Lakes region. This compact sedimentary rock (similar to >





Above: here with wife Maressa, Fred Merwarth took over winemaking at Hermann J Wiemer in 2003

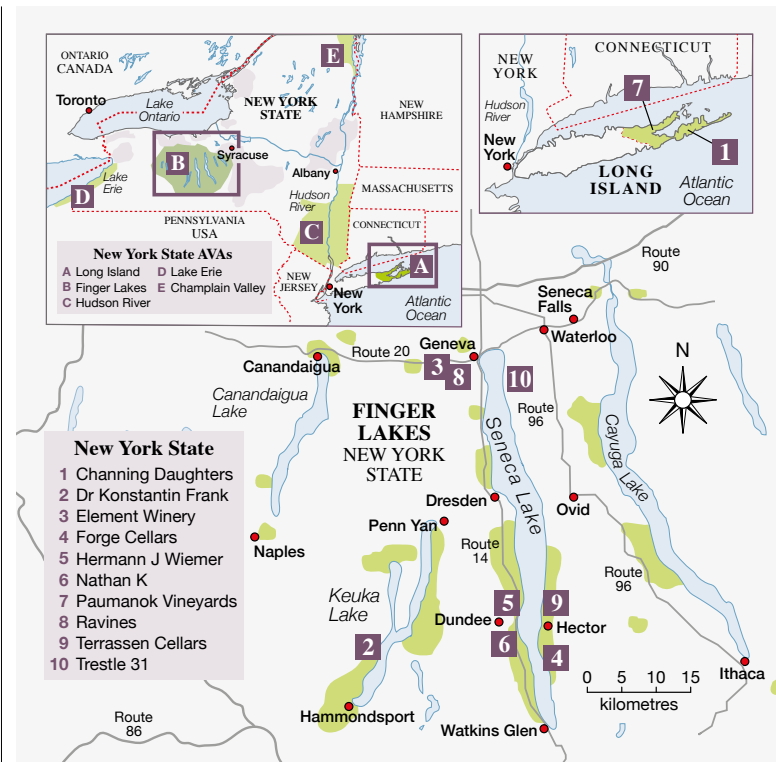
slate but softer and mixed with clay) limits vigour and yield, producing high-quality results. The region receives regular rainfall throughout the growing season and most of the vineyards are dry-farmed. Quality-oriented growers will install drainage tiles when planting a new vineyard.

Riesling is still the core of the range at Dr Konstantin Frank today, but its founder was also an inveterate experimenter, with a PhD in viticulture from Odessa Polytechnic Institute. Among the varieties that he planted was the Georgian white grape Rkatsiteli, which the company still produces, in two versions: one is fermented on the skins, as in Georgian qvevri, and the other after pressing. Frank's great-granddaughter Meaghan is working as general manager alongside her father Frederick. She enthuses about another Georgian variety, the red Saperavi: 'This grape has a lot of potential here – it's become a rising star partly because of its deep colour, which is [generally] difficult to achieve in the Finger Lakes.'

Cool thinking

Hermann J Wiemer was another early advocate of Riesling in the Finger Lakes; his family had been growers in Germany's Mosel valley for generations. He moved to New York in 1968 to work for the Taylor Wine Co (later called Bully Hill), which had been producing wine from hybrids since the 19th century. Wiemer had his heart set on Riesling, however, and in 1974 he began to plant vineyards for his eponymous winery.

His protégé, Fred Merwarth, continues to fine-tune the relationship between the grape and the site. 'The first site, our home vineyard (now called the HJW Vineyard), is cooler because it's on shallow shale soils high up on the plateau. When you get closer to the lake,



Map: Maggie Nelson



'Finger Lakes Riesling is similar to the Mosel, while Long Island is more like the Pfalz'

Kareem Massoud, Paumanok Vineyards (above)

there's more of a warming effect from the water.' In 1999, Wiemer bought a site located 16km further north, where the fruit can ripen two weeks earlier. Merwarth's business partner Oskar Bynke notes: 'Now that we're 40 years into it, we're having a much deeper conversation about sites. It's no longer just "east side of the lake" or "west side of the lake".' >

NEW YORK STATE AT A GLANCE

- Number of wineries** 403
- Area under vine** 1,400ha
- Most-planted varieties** Riesling, Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Pinot Noir
- Production (2018)** 1.1m hl
- First vineyard** 1647
- First commercial winery** Brotherhood in 1838
- AVAs (established)** Finger Lakes (1982), Hudson River Region (1982), Lake Erie (1983), North Fork of Long Island (1986), Cayuga Lake (1988), Long Island (2001), Seneca Lake (2003), The Hamptons, Long Island (2005), Niagara Escarpment (2005), Champlain Valley of New York (2016), Upper Hudson (2019)

New York state: 10 names to know

CHANNING DAUGHTERS

The winery was founded in 1982 by Walter Channing in Bridgehampton on the South Fork of Long Island. Grapes planted include Friulano, Muscat Ottonel, Malvasia, Ribolla Gialla, Blaufränkisch, Dornfelder, Syrah, Teroldego, Refosco and Lagrein. The winery produces a dizzying array of styles. Nearly 12ha of vines are spread over five sites in Long Island's characteristic silty loam soil on sand and gravel.

DR KONSTANTIN FRANK

Konstantin Frank (1899-1985) studied viticulture in Ukraine and managed Soviet wineries in the Republic of Georgia before emigrating to the US in 1951. His Riesling trials secured him the title of the 'father of vinifera' in New York state, and his son Willy pioneered traditional-method sparkling wine production here. Grandson Frank and great-granddaughter Meaghan continue the tradition of innovation and quality.

ELEMENT WINERY

Master Sommelier Christopher Bates grew up in the Finger Lakes. Today he wears many hats: restaurateur, sommelier, winemaker and chef. After making wine in the Mosel and the Veneto, he returned to found a winery with his father. He started with Riesling, but by 2010 he'd focused on red wine and now makes some of the most convincing renditions of Cabernet Franc and Syrah around.

FORGE CELLARS

This is a collaboration between Louis Barruol of Château de Saint Cosme in Gigondas and wine-trade veteran Rick Rainey. They concentrate on dry Riesling and Pinot Noir from the east side of Seneca Lake. Founded in 2001, the winery purchased Bellows Vineyard in 2016, located on the steep and well-exposed slopes where grapes ripen superbly well in the afternoon sun.

HERMANN J WIEMER

Bernkastel native Hermann Wiemer realised his dream of making Riesling in the Finger Lakes in 1976 when he began to plant his 32ha site at Seneca Lake. There

are now 55ha planted to 17 different grapes, although Riesling is 70% of the production. The vineyards are sustainably farmed and in biodynamic trials. All the estate fruit is hand-picked and sorted before fermentation on wild yeast.

NATHAN K

Youthful talent Nathan Kendall makes the wines for his own label Nathan K, for Hickory Hollow, and with Pascaline Lepeltier MS for her project Chëpika, where they make still wine and pét-nat from the organically grown hybrid grapes Catawba and Delaware, sourced from Keuka Lake. All of the wines are made with few, if any additions, and as much purity as possible.

PAUMANOK VINEYARDS

Lebanese-born Charles Massoud and his German wife Ursula founded this estate in 1983. Today it includes 40ha under vine with 32ha in current production and new plantings (including Melon de Bourgogne) coming online soon. With their purchase of neighbouring property Palmer Vineyards, the Massoud family is one of the important names in Long Island wine.

RAVINES

Danish-born Morten Hallgren grew up on a winery in Provence and completed wine school in Montpellier. Today he is making some of the most exquisite terroir-driven Riesling anywhere. He began as head winemaker at Dr Konstantin Frank (see above), but purchased his own vineyards in 2001. Today, Ravines owns more than 50ha spread over several sites and



Nathan Kendall



Nova Cadamatre MW, Trestle 31

purchases fruit from the renowned Argetsinger vineyard to produce some of its most-lauded bottlings.

TERRASSEN CELLARS

This is the brainchild of noted sommelier Thomas Pastuszak from Manhattan's NoMad restaurant. The winery is named for Austrian wines blended from sites too small to make a single-vineyard wine but which demonstrate the potential across a region. Pastuszak has a focused range, sourcing Blaufränkisch for rosé along with Gamay and Cabernet Franc. The wines are made in a savoury, fresh style, yet have enough juicy fruit to satisfy the hedonist.

TRESTLE 31

Nova Cadamatre MW was among the first viticulture graduates of New York's Cornell University. She went on to become the head of winemaking for global giant Constellation Brands at its Canandaigua winery. Today, her day job is head winemaker for Robert Mondavi, but Trestle 31 is her personal project with husband Brian. They buy fruit for their production of Riesling and Chardonnay, but in 2015 they purchased land for a vineyard on Seneca Lake. A producer to watch.

Regional diversity

Differences are even more pronounced between different regions within New York state. More than 480km separates the Finger Lakes from the North Fork of Long Island – about the same distance as Rioja to Barcelona.

Bruce Schneider of Gotham Project has been making Cabernet Franc in both the New York regions for 25 years. ‘Cabernet Franc is definitely the red grape of New York State,’ he asserts.

‘Given the different climates we have in the Finger Lakes and Long Island, you can produce a range of styles. To me, the Finger Lakes has more in common with the Loire Valley in terms of climate, whereas on Long Island the wines are a little more full-bodied and structured, more like Right Bank Bordeaux.’

Kareem Massoud of Paumanok Vineyards on the North Fork of Long Island frames the comparison differently, in terms of Riesling: ‘The Finger Lakes is similar to the Mosel, while Long Island is more like the Pfalz.’ Massoud would know – his mother’s family were growers in the Pfalz for several generations before emigrating.

Some have more of a New York frame of reference. Christopher Tracy is the winemaker

at Channing Daughters. His first winemaking job was with the founding winemaker there, Larry Perrine, who had worked with Hermann Wiemer while doing graduate work at Cornell University. Tracy joined the team in 1998 and took over the winemaking in 2002.

The winery has grown steadily during this time. Channing Daughters now farms 12ha and sources fruit from a further 12ha. When he began, they produced four or five wines totalling 4,000-5,000 12-bottle cases annually. Now Channing Daughters produces more than 36 different wines and production can reach 16,000 cases.

According to Tracy: ‘One of the strengths of Long Island is its diversity. We can’t grow everything, but there’s a lot of things we can grow here.’ And they do, producing seven dry rosés, five skin-fermented whites, a full complement of whites and reds, a series of pét-nats and a range of vermouths for good measure.

His goals as a winemaker could serve as a manifesto for New York state: ‘I want the wines to be fun, joyful and hedonistic, but I still want consistency and above all purity of aroma and expression.’



Formerly head of wine for Christie's in the US and Asia, Charles Curtis MW is a widely published journalist, author and fine-wine advisor based in New York



Sheldrake Point

New York top 10: Curtis recommends

① **Hermann J Wiemer, Blanc de Blanc Brut, Seneca Lake 2009** 95

N/A UK www.wiemer.com
Among the best sparkling wines ever produced in the US, this 100% Chardonnay features lively lemony fruit on the initial attack with well-integrated notes of truffle and toast. The mousse is lively while the texture is creamy but still crisp and fresh. Produced from the Josef Vineyard, which ripens fruit exceptionally well, this is 10 years on the lees and disgorged without dosage. Absolutely exquisite!
Drink 2020-2030 Alcohol 12%

Ravines, Brut, Finger Lakes 2012 92

N/A UK www.ravineswine.com
Superb sparkling Pinot Noir-Chardonnay from the limestone soils of the Argetsinger vineyard. Opens with lovely ripe apple and toast aromas, and six years on the lees brings a round, lush texture and a hint of brioche, while an extra-brut dosage of less than 5g/L ensures the wine stays lively and fresh. Almost perfect balance on the gently persistent finish.
Drink 2020-2030 Alc 12.5%

② **Ravines, Argetsinger Vineyard Dry Riesling, Finger Lakes 2016** 94

N/A UK www.ravineswine.com
Produced with fruit from mature vines on the southeast shore of Seneca Lake, this is world-class Riesling by any measure, featuring aromas of ripe apricot, citrus peel and fresh flowers with saline and mineral accents. The texture on the palate is tightly wound and taut, with just the slightest hint of sugar to balance the racy acidity. Impressive length and concentration on the finish.
Drink 2020-2030 Alc 12.5%

③ **Dr Konstantin Frank, Eugenia Dry Riesling, Finger Lakes 2019** 93

N/A UK www.drfrankwines.com
From one of the early plots planted by Dr Konstantin Frank in 1968 on the shallow shale shores of Keuka Lake, this delivers aromas of ripe peach fruit with a pronounced petrolly, mineral edge. An excellent result from a relatively cool vintage, this is bone dry, light and crisp, yet there is an intensity and depth of flavour that is truly rewarding.
Drink 2020-2030 Alc 12%

Trestle 31, Chardonnay, Finger Lakes 2017 93

N/A UK www.trestle31.com
Sourced from the Nutt Road Vineyard on

the western shores of Seneca Lake, this 2017 was the product of a cool, damp season, delivering bright citrus fruit and aromas of fresh white flowers. Fermentation in a combination of cask and stainless steel gives just a touch of spice. The creamy texture brought by the lees ageing balances the impressively racy freshness of the vintage. Wonderfully reminiscent of a well-made Chablis.
Drink 2020-2030 Alc 13%



Forge Cellars, Leidenfrost Vineyard Pinot Noir, Seneca Lake 2018 93

£25 Bibenbum Wine
A benchmark for the region, this is produced in shale soils on the west-facing slopes of Seneca Lake. Initial aromas of ripe cherries with an earthy, mineral edge lead to a wine that is firm-textured, dry and fairly tannic, yet still generously fruity. The overall impression is one of lightness and elegance, but there is no lack of density here.
Drink 2020-2030 Alc 12%

④ **Silver Thread, Good Earth Cabernet Franc, Finger Lakes 2019** 92



N/A UK www.silverthreadwine.com
Marvellously true to the Loire Valley tradition, this is produced from estate vineyards on the leeward side of Seneca Lake using regenerative and bio-intensive viticulture. The result is aged 10 months in old casks and delivers a wine light in colour but fragrantly aromatic, with notes of currant and cranberry and a suggestion of mint. The tannins are firm but completely ripe, and the texture is silky and delicate.
Drink 2020-2030 Alc 12.8%

⑤ **Terrassen, Cabernet Franc, Finger Lakes 2018** 92

N/A UK [@TerrassenFLX](https://twitter.com/TerrassenFLX)
Fruit grown on mature vines on eastern Seneca Lake is cold-soaked in open-top vats and fermented on native yeasts. The wine is deceptively light in colour yet shows ripe blackcurrant and cassis fruit that almost has an edge of dark chocolate to it. There is a richness that was completely unexpected and an impressive density and length – but without any astringency or heaviness. Marvellously good!
Drink 2020-2030 Alc 12%

Channing Daughters, Home Farm Vineyard Lagrein, The Hamptons, Long Island 2017 91

£27 Wanderlust Wine
Relatively young vines produced this

startlingly good Lagrein, with bright aromas of ripe mulberry fruit and a brambly edge. The fruit is picked by hand, destemmed and crushed by foot before fermentation on native yeasts and ageing in neutral barrels. The result shows plenty of tannins but a ripe density and crisp texture that carry it to a lingering finish.
Drink 2020-2025 Alc 12.5%

⑥ **Sheldrake Point, Riesling Ice Wine, Finger Lakes 2018** 94

N/A UK www.sheldrakepoint.com
Super-rich and concentrated, this is densely packed with aromas of tropical fruit drenched in honey along with accents of white flowers and saffron typical of the best ice wines. Although immensely sweet (230g/L of residual sugar), there is enough acidity to keep it perfectly fresh and balanced. The finish is enormously long and lingers beguilingly on the palate.
Drink 2020-2030 Alc 8.4%

Decanter
PREMIUM

For Charles Curtis MW's tasting notes on 40 additional New York wines, see Decanter.com/Premium