

So many wines, so little time

A few days in New York's Finger Lakes wine region is just the tip of the glacial iceberg. With more than 100 wineries, it's impossible to visit all of them, but you can discover award-winning wines with a little planning.

STORY: MARY ANN DESANTIS

Choosing which wineries to visit in Finger Lakes, New York, is not an easy task and recommending only three or four wines to drink is downright impossible. As the largest wine-producing region east of California, the Finger Lakes American Viticultural Area (AVA) is far reaching, and wines run the gamut from the region's well-known rieslings to completely unexpected varietals like cabernet francs or dry amber vignerons.

First, the size: 9,000 square miles, an area larger than the state of New Hampshire, is more than visitors can cover in just a couple of days—or even a week—especially when touring the region's other sites and historic attractions. The 11 freshwater lakes, formed by glaciers thousands of years

ago, are home to four distinct wine trails that provide an easily navigable way to travel through the area.

Many people who have never been to the area believe the wines from the Finger Lakes are all rieslings, and sweet ones at that. Indeed, there are some sweet, lighter wines, especially around the Canandaigua Lake Trail, a 41-mile-long route that runs from south of Rochester to Naples, New York. The 16-mile lake often is called “the playground of the Finger Lakes” because of the many recreational activities available, both in the summer and winter.

The picturesque town of Canandaigua—which means “the chosen spot” in the language of the native Americans who inhabited

the region—is a great place to start a wine expedition. The town is home to the New York Wine and Culinary Center, a must-do stop if you are a first-time visitor to the area. The nonprofit center is designed to educate visitors and create excitement about New York's varied beverage, agriculture, and culinary industries. Start in the tasting room, where you can compare Finger Lakes wines side-by-side with wines from New York's other AVA regions, such as Long Island or Lake Erie. Then take a wine pairing or a cooking class in one of the center's state-of-the-art classrooms. Finish up with lunch or dinner at the Upstairs Bistro overlooking Canandaigua Lake. The Bistro servers guided me through some of the best wine and cheese pairings I've ever

had—and not a single one included a syrupy-sweet wine.

Melissa Knoblauch, Canandaigua's community relations manager, acknowledged that Finger Lakes' sweet reputation was not entirely wrong because many people wanted sweeter wines. But winemakers have perfected their techniques to make serious wines.

“They said, ‘We have shown you that we can make what you like; now let us show you what we like,’” she says. And with that, the evening at the culinary center ended with a Chateau Frank *Celébré Sparkling Rosé*, a well-balanced *Crémant*-style wine made from pinot meunier grapes.

A taste of history

No trip to the Finger Lakes is complete without a tasting at Dr. Konstantin Frank Wines in Hammondsport on the Keuka Lake Wine Trail. Dr. Frank, a plant science professor originally from the Ukraine, is often called the “father of Finger Lakes winemaking” for his work with *Vitis vinifera* vines, which led to the region's production of world-class

European-style wines. Six generations later, his family still runs the winery that bears his name.

While the Dr. Frank tasting room is a happy, delightful place, especially on weekends, plan your trip so you can experience the 1886 Reserve Tasting Room, especially for the Barrel Series Experience for only \$35. On weekends from June to October, four Dr. Frank wines are paired with foods created by local chefs and served in the 1886 building, which Dr. Frank's son purchased in 1980, next door to the winery.

Reservations are definitely needed because the event is first class with sit-down service in a dining room surrounded by beautiful artwork. In addition to the food pairings, another highlight of my October Barrel Experience was tasting the Dr. Frank Lemberger wine from a barrel in the cellar.

Lemberger grapes are native to Austria and produce a medium body red wine that pairs well with salmon and strong cheeses.

After leaving Dr. Frank's large-scale winery, I had a brief stop at the boutique Keuka Lake Vineyards, open only 11 years and

already getting 90-plus ratings on some of its wines from Wine Spectator and Wine Enthusiast.

Former Peace Corps volunteer Mel Goldman and his wife planted their grapes in 1998.

“I once worked in a kibbutz where they grew grapes... and I never forgot that experience,” says Mel, who is more often working in his vineyard than in the tasting room. “We visited Burgundy and Napa, and discovered Finger Lakes in 1992.

I like that wineries here are ‘pioneers’ because we are not close to a major metropolis. People don't realize we are six hours from New York City.”

That has not, however, deterred many New York restaurants from discovering Keuka Lake Vineyards and serving Mel's wines.

In addition to Canandaigua Lake and Keuka Lake Wine Trails, two other larger wine trails offer even more wine-tasting experiences.

Both Cayuga and Seneca Lakes have their own American Viticultural Areas completely contained within the Finger Lakes AVA.

For a complete listing of wineries and wine trails, visit fingerlakes.org

WHAT “SALUTÉ” BROUGHT HOME:

Keuka Lake Vineyards Dry Amber Vignerons, 2016:

Specializing in small lots of wine, Keuka Lakes is one of the few offering the dry amber vignerons that has a bright orange color. Although there are hints of orange peel and tropical fruit flavors, the wine is known for its dry tannins and crisp acidity. \$30.

Keuka Lake Vineyards Estate Grown Dry Riesling, Evergreen Lek Vineyard, 2015:

This single vineyard is planted near evergreen trees, giving this tart wine lots of minerality and slate flavor. \$27.

Dr. Konstantin Frank 2015 Lemberger:

A cool climate grape, the Lemberger is well-suited to the Finger Lakes steep hillsides. The aromas of black pepper and sour cherry are complemented with medium tannins and long finishes. \$22.



Mary Ann DeSantis

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