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May/June 2010

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New York Wine Country

Western and Central New York's Wine Regions harvest food, fun and refreshment.

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A Place at the Table—Lake Erie's Grape Belt

By David Noyes

There was a cool mist in the air as I followed Jennifer Johnson on a tour of the vineyards at Johnson Estate Winery in Westfield. “Grapes have been grown on this land for over a century,” she noted as her family story began to unfold. While we walked over the 220-acre farm, she shared how almost five decades ago her father-in-law was a pioneer in planting French-American hybrid and vinifera grapes in a region dominated by the Concord.

The Johnson family has owned the property 60 miles south of Buffalo since English immigrant Fred Johnson purchased the farm and historic house along the banks of Freulings Creek in 1909. Calling it Sunnyslope Vineyards, Fred was the first to run the land as a commercial fruit farm, growing peaches, apples and cherries along with Concord grapes. When his son Frederick took over the farm in 1960, he proceeded to remove the fruit trees and replaced the majority of the Concord grapes with new French-America hybrids grafted to hearty native rootstock. The winery officially began production in 1961 and currently produces 30 varieties of wine.

As the president of the Chautauqua-Lake Erie Wine Trail, Jennifer is invested in much more than her family’s estate winery; she is a driving force in promoting the emerging wine trail and celebrating the historic traditions and new directions of the largest grape-growing region east of the Rockies.

Located along the southeastern shore of Lake Erie—nestled between the lake and the Allegheny Plateau—the 50-mile stretch of verdant countryside known as the grape belt has over 20,000 acres of vineyards, nearly 1,000 farms and 21 wineries. The distinct lake-affected climate, gravelly soil and protective ridge combine to make it a unique microclimate that has become the largest Concord grape-growing area in the world and, more recently, home to award-winning wines.

A Sacramental Wine

While winemaking in Western New York began as early as the 1830s, by the time a young physician, dentist and former preacher named Thomas Welch produced the first “unfermented sacramental wine” in 1869, Lake Erie’s grape belt was already dominated by



Early Grape Juice Processing at Welch's Grape Juice Company
Photo courtesy of Welch's National Grape Cooperative.

the Concord and other table grape varieties.

An ardent prohibitionist and communion steward at a Methodist church, Dr. Welch was troubled by the use of wine in the service of the church. Surrounded by vineyards in a town appropriately called Vineland in south-central New Jersey, he was inspired to make a non-alcoholic wine. Learning of a new process that we now call pasteurization, Dr. Welch heated the juice of Concord grapes—killing the yeast that leads to the natural process of fermentation—which created alcohol-free grape juice.

In the following decades, his juice saw very little growth as a commercial beverage despite his marketing efforts. In 1875, Charles Welch took over the floundering company, but it wasn't until after thousands sampled the fruity drink at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 that grape juice became a national success.

Following a devastating black rot outbreak in 1897 that drastically reduced New Jersey's grape harvest, Charles moved his grape juice operations to Westfield in the heart of the Concord grape belt. In their first year in Westfield, Welch's Grape Juice Company sold 50,000 gallons of juice made from Chautauqua Country Concord; 10 years later production reached 1 million.

With the late 19th-century popularity of table grapes and the growing juice market, vineyards along the shores of Lake Erie continued their commitment to the grape, but not necessarily to the business of making wine. The strong local sentiment against alcohol consumption also reinforced the area's commitment to growing grapes for juice, jams and jellies.

A New Tradition of Winemaking

As we made our way to the tasting room at Johnson Estate, Jennifer turned our conversation to the wine trail and winemaking. "Our climate is Germanic in nature, which is ideal for Rieslings, ice wines, seyvals, Gewürztraminer and pinot grigio," she began, as glasses and bottles began to appear from behind the bar. The estate now grows 11 types of grapes and purchases others like merlot and cabernet sauvignon for their Freeings Creek vinifera wines, she went on to explain before moving on to the challenges of promoting a relatively new wine trail.

Started informally in 2000, the Chautauqua-Lake Erie Wine Trail was born of a small group of wineries that included Johnson Estate, Woodbury, Merritt Estate and Schloss Doepken. By 2002, their efforts were formalized into the Chautauqua Wine Trail Association, and by 2004 it had expanded to include wineries in northern Pennsylvania. "This presents unique challenges, like state tourism maps that stop at the border, showing only half the trail," Jennifer commented.

But the word is spreading, and now the wine trail numbers 21 winery members producing handcrafted wines and supporting local enterprises with their "Go Green and Buy Local" initiative. With two additional operations starting in 2010, the trail is adding events throughout the year, culminating with the increasingly popular Harvest Wine Weekends in November.

"People are starting to realize that we live in a cornucopia of local offerings with regional specialties," Jennifer continued. "We can grow and produce outstanding food and wine right here in our own backyard."

Just down the road from Johnson Estate in Westfield, work has begun on the Concord Grape Discovery Center, which is expected to open this fall. Featuring a learning center, tasting room, theater and, of course, gift shop, the center will be a celebration of the region's long agricultural history and the importance of the grape to the local economy. From the original table grapes to juices, jams and jellies, local grapes have long enjoyed a place at America's breakfast table; now they enjoy more sophisticated pairings as some of the area's best wines.

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Forever Emerging—Finger Lakes Wine Belt

By Thomas Pellechia

We've read it before: New York's scenic jewel, the Finger Lakes region, is "the state's best-kept secret." But surely, the region is no longer a secret.

Between the towns and villages, local roads with the feel of an amusement park roller coaster connect the region's 11 natural lakes that were formed 10,000 years ago as the last of the ice age glaciers receded. Each picturesque route traces a historic pathway leading to post-revolutionary towns and villages with names like Painted Post, Bath, Hammondsport and Penn Yan.

A breathtaking countryside of valley vegetable and dairy farms rests at the base of lush, fruit-laden hillsides, plus the signature vineyard slopes that supply the region's important wine industry. Significant as it is, though, the wines of the region still seem to be in perpetual emergence.



Fruits of the Vine

Winemaking in the region had a humble beginning in the 1830s when the Town of York, situated at the extreme western edge of the Finger Lakes region in what is today Livingston County, hosted commercial wine production for a few decades. But the wine business was small—just one family winery—and it was finally done in by the eminent domain of railroad tracks.

In Steuben County to the east, at the south port of the uniquely cursive Y-shaped Keuka Lake, a minister named Bostwick bought grapevine cuttings in 1829 from a Hudson Valley nursery to plant in his newly established church backyard in the Village of Hammondsport, both for table grapes and for sacramental wine. Within a few years after the vineyard was planted, table grapes became an important commercial crop as the local timber industry faltered. The Erie Canal—and later the railroad—played major roles in gaining successful access for Keuka table grapes in faraway markets.

It wasn't until the late 1850s that commercial wine made its appearance in Hammondsport where, over succeeding centuries, a major Finger Lakes wine industry emerged—three times.

By the end of the 19th century, about 18 wineries thrived around Keuka Lake, establishing it as the center of the Finger Lakes wine industry. Most of the wineries were small, started by families or local groups of business associates. About 25 percent of them grew to greater proportions, large enough to make a sizable dent in the local economy in 1920, when Prohibition shut down the wine industry.

Over the next 13 years, the two largest outfits, the Pleasant Valley Wine Company and the rapidly growing Taylor Wine Company, survived by producing sacramental wine, sparkling grape juice and juice for home winemaking.



Dr. Frank's Vinifera Wine Cellars
Photo: David Noyes

After Repeal in 1933, cumbersome rules and regulations relegated the family winery to a thing of the past. The new wine industry that emerged at Keuka became dominated by a handful of large wineries that grew larger over the next 40 years, with Taylor in the lead.

Keuka: The Lady of the Lakes

From its start, and for 100 years thereafter, Keuka wines were dominated by so-called native American grape varieties with names like Concord, Catawba and Isabella. These wines came with a distinct “grapey” characteristic that was unknown in European wines. In the 1940s, nursery-bred French-American and other hybrid grapevines made an impression, with the promise of cold-hardy grapes that could duplicate the quality of European wines. But in the succeeding decade, two immigrants arrived at Keuka Lake with a better idea.

From the Champagne region of France, Charles Fournier joined the large Gold Seal Winery with the aim to produce European-style wine; and from Russia, Konstantin Frank arrived bringing with him the knowledge to breed and grow European grapevines under harsh weather conditions. At first, area academics and local wine producers were unmoved by these ideas.

A collaboration of Fournier and Frank culminated in the 1960s with the release under the Gold Seal label of the first ever commercially successful production of European-style Riesling and Chardonnay wines in the Finger Lakes. The two wines promised a revolution, but holding back success was a combination of continuing skepticism and those legal restrictions from Repeal that prevented innovative entrepreneurs from forming family wineries.

In 1976, with the giant Taylor Wine Company ranked as the sixth largest domestic winery in the U.S.—and one of the most profitable—the New York Legislature passed the Farm Winery Act, which established new licensing rules to make it easier and less expensive for small family wineries to emerge and to survive. At the same time, as the corporate take-over mania of the period made its way to Keuka Lake, the largely private local wine giants had gone public.

Unable to compete with other giants, they fell into a combination of near and actual oblivion.

What’s Old Is New...Again



Pleasant Valley Wine Company
Photo: David Noyes

The Fournier-Frank collaboration and the Farm Winery Act set the stage for the emergence of a new Finger Lakes wine industry that would no longer be confined to local grapes and no longer be dominated by giant companies. Two of the earliest of those wineries at Keuka remain—Dr. Konstantin Frank's Vinifera Wine Cellars, and Heron Hill Vineyards. But the revolution also proved the "beginning of the end" of Keuka primacy over the Finger Lakes wine industry. To Keuka's east, at Seneca Lake, Glenora Wine Cellars, Hermann Wiemer Vineyards and Wagner Vineyards got into the game early on, and a few wineries also started up farther east along Cayuga Lake's shores.



The Blue Heron Café at Heron Hill Winery
Photo: David Noyes

In the early to mid-1980s, the Finger Lakes region was home to about two-dozen wineries, scattered among five of the lakes. In addition to the above pioneers, some of the early wineries include Casa Larga (between Canandaigua Lake and Rochester); Bully Hill, Hunt Country and McGregor (Keuka Lake); Fox Run, Prejean, Lafayette Reneau and Four Chimneys (Seneca Lake); and Knapp, Frontenac Point and Hosmer (Cayuga Lake).

Today, the "old guard" is joined by over 100 wineries spanning seven of the lakes. Except for the global Constellation Brands based near Rochester, none is giant-size.

In the palates of consumers and visitors, Finger Lakes wines have established themselves as worldclass. A visit to the region to taste wine proves it. The only problem with the visit, if you want to call it a problem, is that it takes more than a single day or a single weekend to take in its endless and varying beauty in addition to tasting its wonderful wine bounty. For that, you need to go back many times—and each visit proves that the Finger Lakes wine region is indeed forever emerging.

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Finger Lakes Getaway—A Day Trip to Remember

By Margaret McCormick

Touring the vineyard-dotted countryside and taking in scenic lake views and lush green parks keeps even a repeat visitor reaching for her camera—and sampling the palate-pleasing red and white wines born from the grapes of Cayuga Lake Wine Trail, the first such trail in New York state.

One of the best diversions along the trail is the city of Ithaca, where you could easily spend a day or more. Ithaca is the home of Cornell University, Ithaca College and the Ithaca Farmers Market, which is not to be missed. If you've come to the region to enjoy its signature Riesling and other wines, the market—with 150 vendors from a 30-mile radius—is a perfect pairing.

My home is a couple counties away from the market, yet I'm drawn to it on summer Saturdays, tossing a cooler in the car and traveling 55 miles to get there. I'm far from the only out-of-towner to feel the love for this slice of Ithaca life; the market attracts thousands of visitors to Steamboat Landing on the Cayuga Lake inlet each year.

The place is a sea of people clomping through the wooden pavilion, some trying to juggle their purchases, push a stroller, and nibble on an ice cream cone at the same time. From the commotion springs a riot of color—from the rainbow chard; purple and white carrots (who knew?); oddly shaped orange, yellow and red heirloom tomatoes and other seasonal produce piled on tables, to sunflowers and hydrangea blossoms poking out of vases.

Despite the pulse and the pace of the moving crowds, I always find a spot to stop and breathe in the scene and the co-mingling of so many delightful smells—like radishes and ripe raspberries, fragrant farmstead cheeses and yeasty bread.

The Ithaca Farmers Market offers many interesting possibilities for munching and lunching. On a visit last summer, I feasted on peanut-lime noodles and iced tea from market mainstay Macro Mamas. We enjoyed listening to the bluegrass music outside and lingered a while in a nicely shaded spot, watching the endless parade of people and families, before making two more stops: one for homemade ice cream and another to re-fuel with a caffeine jolt (and bag of beans for home brewing) from Ithaca roaster Gimme! Coffee.

Then we plopped our purchases in the car, sighed contentedly, and departed Planet Ithaca for points north, vowing to come back again when apricots, peaches and corn give way to apples, pumpkins and turnips.

For more information and to plan your next trip to New York Wine Country, visit AAA.com/Wine.

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Ithaca Farmer's Market



Taughannock Falls
Photo by Joe Braun Photography
—www.citrusmilo.com

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