

the Unicorn Review

Why New York's Finger Lakes is a Wine Region to Watch

The Finger Lakes wine region is no longer emerging—it's arrived. Here are some producers and bottles to look out for.

Maiah Johnson Dunn · Jan 15, 2026



When can we stop calling a wine region “emerging?” When do we get to say it’s actually “arrived?” Is it only after a proven track record of creating exceptional wines? Perhaps it’s when the talent is finally recognized for its efforts in the vineyards and cellars? Or maybe it's the terroir?

I pose this question because I have been writing about Finger Lakes wine for nearly 10 years, and in that time the region is consistently referred to as “emerging.” Sure, it doesn’t have the same pedigree as a region like Burgundy, but the term doesn’t quite feel appropriate anymore.

Over the past decade, I've watched the FLX (as we locals call it) become confident about its footing as a globally celebrated American Viticultural Area. I found myself so drawn to the beauty of this place and the kindness of the people that I relocated to the area from my hometown of Boston. I even switched careers from marketing to wine writing, as well as educating at a wine and culinary center on Canandaigua Lake.

Most recently, the FLX was named the [2025 Wine Star American Wine Region of the Year](#) by Wine Enthusiast Magazine. This was a massive win for the 140 wineries that dot the lush and rolling green hills between the region's 11 glacier-carved lakes. Many are small, family-owned businesses. Some are growing their own estate grapes, while others partner with local vineyards to source fruit throughout the region. They are turning 10,000 planted acres of vinifera and hybrid grapes into an important slice of New York's economy.

A genuine commercial interest in the region dates back to the 1870s, when US Bonded Winery No. 1 (Pleasant Valley in Hammondsport) won gold at a sparkling wine competition in Vienna, Austria. This was a first for the U.S., and it piqued the interest of Champagne-based winemakers like Charles Fournier of Veuve Clicquot to emigrate after Prohibition to pursue making bubbles.

In the early 1950s, Ukrainian refugee Dr. Konstantin Frank arrived after fleeing his home during World War II and eventually landing in the FLX. His experience farming cold-climate vinifera on a 35,000-acre experimental grape station in Odesa, Ukraine, made him uniquely qualified to reveal New York's true potential. With the help of volunteers across the region, Frank and Fournier ignited a vinifera revolution further bolstered by Guy Devaux of Moët et Chandon (and Mumm Napa) through the '60s and '70s. Their confidence in New York's potential for fine wine helped the region exponentially.

No Grit, No Glory

The Finger Lakes region is known for having unpredictable weather like late-season freezes, stifling summer humidity, relentless downpours, and drought. Disease and animal pressure can also impact crops.

The lakes, including the Great Lakes Ontario and Erie, are essential to the region's success. Seneca is the largest and deepest, followed by Cayuga, which is also the widest. Both are some of the deepest in the United States and rarely freeze in the winter. The lakes moderate the extreme temperatures, offering heat retention in the winter and cooling the region in the summer.

Many growers are refining their sustainable vineyard practices, while winemakers are focused on expressing the uniqueness of each growing season in the cellar. Some of the most beautiful and age-worthy bottles have come from the most difficult years.

Unsure where to start? The region is often compared to the Mosel, Bordeaux, and Alsace. And rightfully so, with its cool-climate viticulture, impactful lakes, and diverse geology (slate, limestone, and shale with soils spanning from clay to sandy silt). The wines range from bone-dry to dessert-sweet, and are expressive of the site and the maker. They are typically crisp, aromatic, and mineral-driven. The reds are generally bright, fresh, fruit-forward offerings with structured acidity and well-integrated tannins.

Riesling is always a good choice, along with Gewürztraminer and sparkling wines (many are producing Méthode Champenoise). For reds, explore Cabernet Franc, Saperavi (the Finger Lakes has the largest acreage of this variety outside of the Republic of Georgia), Blaufränkisch, and Bordeaux-style blends.

Six Cellar-Worthy Producers Worth Seeking Out

Dr. Konstantin Frank Winery

For more than 60 years, the Frank family has been crafting cool-climate wines from the Finger Lakes. Dr. Frank traded 35,000 acres in Odesa, Ukraine for 188 on the west side of Keuka Lake. He experimented with 60 different grafted vinifera onto phylloxera and cold-resistant rootstock. His first commercial vintage was in 1962—his American dream, realized.

Today, the estate is focused on its old vines (the oldest are Riesling and Pinot Noir planted in 1958) through careful vineyard management and care in the cellar. The wines are balanced in flavor and structure.

Dr. Frank Winery is also known for its sparkling wine program—Frank’s son, Willy, produced the region’s first Méthode Champenoise wine in 1985. The business is now run by his great-granddaughter, Meaghan, and her father, Fred.

Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard & Winery

In the 1970s, German immigrant Hermann J. Wiemer transformed his vineyard on the west side of Seneca from soybeans to vinifera. He also established a nursery in 1974 that still serves growers nationwide. In fact, HJW remains the only East Coast winery with an operating nursery, and the only Demeter-certified property east of the Rockies.

The focus at HJW is crafting clean wines that let the vintage shine. The estate wines are hand-harvested, sorted, and processed in small batches. Wiemer’s legacy is carried on by Fred Merwarth, who began as an apprentice in 2001 before taking over the business in 2007 with his wife, Maressa, and friend, Oskar Bynke. In 2021, Merwarth became the first and only New York winemaker to be named the Enthusiast’s [Wine Star Winemaker of the Year](#).

HJW is one of the only wineries with a consumer-friendly wine library built to showcase decades of wine designed to last. Here, guests will be surprised by the vibrancy of their older vintages, which are also available for sale.

Ravines Wine Cellars

Winemaker Morten Hallgren was one of the first winemakers to showcase truly dry Riesling in the Finger Lakes. Born in Denmark, Hallgren grew up in Provence, where his family managed an estate winery. Committed to the industry, Hallgren earned degrees in Viticulture and Enology before traveling the world to make wine in Bordeaux, Texas, North Carolina, and the Finger Lakes.

2025 marked 25 years of business for Hallgren and his wife, Lisa. During that time, they've become known for their vibrantly aromatic dry Rieslings, old-world-inspired Pinot Noir, and structured Bordeaux blends. The wines are crafted using fruit from their certified sustainable vineyards on Keuka and Seneca Lakes.

For those looking to collect Finger Lakes reds, older Ravines offerings are particularly compelling, especially the Pinot Noir and Le Petit Caporal, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc.

Red Tail Ridge Winery

Run by Nancy Irelan and her partner in wine and life, Mike Schnelle, Red Tail Ridge anchors 50 acres on Seneca's west side. Before the Finger Lakes, Irelan was based in Napa where she worked as the vice president of viticulture and enology research & development for Gallo. Her projects in collaboration with Cornell University and the USDA brought her to the Finger Lakes, where the pair purchased property in 2002.

Irelan crafts terroir-driven wines that stay true to Schnelle's efforts in the vineyards. She works with Riesling, Chardonnay, and Cabernet Franc, but has championed more obscure varieties as well, like Dornfelder, Teroldego, and Lagrein.

She is also known for her sparkling wine. In 2025, she launched Limnad to critical acclaim from reviewers. Limnad is a separate label focused 100% on Finger Lakes sparkling.

Forge Cellars

Forge is a joint project between Rick Rainey and Louis Barroul of Château de St. Cosme in the Southern Rhone Village of Gigondas. Barroul's goal with Forge was to "express in wine the soul of a place." This is made possible with Rainey, who steers the operation, and winemaker Léana Goddard.

Sustainability is the driving force behind everything Forge Cellars does. This means responsible farming and supporting local growers, less excess in the production process by removing capsules and reducing bottle weights, and a commitment to providing staff with a living wage.

Through partnerships with up to 16 Seneca Lake growers, Forge has popularized single-vineyard offerings of Riesling, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Cabernet Franc. Every wine sees some level of oak treatment, adding texture and complexity.

Trestle Thirty One

Trestle Thirty One was founded by Nova Cadamatre, the first female winemaker to earn her Master of Wine in the U.S. A graduate of Cornell University, Cadamatre returned to the Finger Lakes following her time as director of winemaking for Robert Mondavi in Napa. Her move home was a leap of faith, not only in the FLX but in herself.

Cadamatre's wines are dry, textural, and precise. They are generally small-batch productions of 150 cases or fewer. Trestle celebrated 10 years of business in 2025 and is currently offering a Riesling vertical for sale that demonstrates not only the distinct terroir of the Finger Lakes but also Cadamatre's growth as a bi-coastal winemaker consulting on projects in New York and California. She currently operates an urban tasting room in the city of Geneva, but will break ground on a future Seneca Lake winery soon.