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New York's Finger Lakes

Impressive Rieslings and ambitious reds push quality higher

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Quality is on the upswing in New York's Finger Lakes region, near the state's northern border. In general, the best Finger Lakes wines offer fine value-and there's a growing diversity of wines from which to choose.

Whites, especially Riesling, remain the strong suit of this cool-climate region. The recently released Ravines Riesling Finger Lakes Dry Argetsinger Vineyard 2008 (91 points on the Wine Spectator 100-point scale, \$25) is the second consecutive vintage of this wine to earn an outstanding rating, making the bottling the first nondessert wine from the area to earn 90 or more points in back-to-back vintages. Other tastings this year have also turned up solid wines. Reds are growing in number and quality, though on smaller scale so far.

That said, the Finger Lakes region still has a ways to go in terms of quality and in catching the trendy fire of, say, Argentine Malbec. Yet the past decade has seen explosive growth in the number of wineries: 127 of the current 240 Finger Lakes wineries didn't exist prior to 2000.

The Finger Lakes wine industry was born of a mix between hybrid grapes (such as Vidal Blanc) and native American varieties (such as Concord and Catawba), grown to big yields to feed large companies' jug-wine production during the 1970s and 1980s. Those days are just about over. Today, Finger Lakes wine is increasingly reliant on European vinifera varieties such as Riesling, Cabernet Franc, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. These grapes require low yields to produce good quality, particularly in a short-growing-season area such as upstate New York.

Until recently, Finger Lakes wineries were content to sell their wares through their tasting rooms, mostly to local customers. But as the numbers of wineries has increased, the economic pie has shrunk. The region's wineries now need to get their wines to cities like New York and beyond if they want to survive.

There's also a cultural hold on the region, left over from the days of comfortably growing high-yield, low quality grapes. The adoption of low yields, vinifera grapes and higher quality means selling wines at higher prices, a prospect that frightens some Finger Lakes producers who fear charging more than \$15 a bottle. Yet at that price point, it isn't economically viable to reduce yields to 4 tons (or less) per acre.

Despite this cultural stumbling block, a few vintners are trying to push the envelope by focusing on vinifera and homing in on sites that yield exceptional quality. What follows are profiles of three producers striving to shape the future of the Finger Lakes.

Sam Argetsinger

A former woodsman turns top grapegrower

Standing maybe 5' 7", Sam Argetsinger is swinging a pickax that seems almost as big as he is. A weathered but spry 58, he twirls it with seeming ease as he walks. As I approach, he greets me in Iroquois. I recognize the Native American tongue only because his reputation for speaking it precedes him.

In a black knit wool cap, muddy boots and jeans, he looks every bit the lumberjack he has been for 40 years. These days, though, he finds himself more often in the vineyard rows on his family estate, which has been growing grapes of one sort or another since 1883. Argetsinger's site just might be the best Riesling vineyard in the region, a function of its unique situation combined with Argetsinger's own attention. He takes little credit, though.

"This farm has survived my learning curve," he says, his steely blue eyes lighting up as he laughs.

The Argetsinger vineyard is located up a winding gravel road, between Hector Falls and Tug Hollow Gorge. These two drainage channels have cut into the earth for years, exposing the region's common fractured-shale soils, water cascading over steps left by glacial retreat. Once connected, the two channels split, diverting around Argetsinger's sloped, north-facing vineyard.

By doing so, they produced a rarity-thin, gravelly loam over limestone deposits left behind when the area was underwater during an earlier geological period. That limestone adds snap and a mineral tang to Argetsinger's Riesling, which winemaker Morten Hallgren is bottling for his own Ravines label (Argetsinger also sells some Riesling to Damiani Wine Cellars).

The site's low vigor naturally produces less than 3 tons an acre, which gives the grapes their concentration and depth. The vineyard's elevation, standing on uplands (whereas most are sited closer to the warming banks of Seneca Lake), produces grapes with brighter, racier acidity. The combination of these factors gives the spot a special status in the wine world; it's real terroir.

The site has proven so good that Argetsinger is planning to graft over the old Delaware vines that are still taking up a 2.2-acre section of the vineyard. The Delaware vines, themselves grafted onto hardy, 3309 rootstock, are now 30 years old. It would be easier and cheaper to just rip them out entirely and plant all new vines and rootstock. But Argetsinger plans to regraft onto the existing rootstock, which has a life expectancy of more than 100 years.

The benefit will be Riesling vines that immediately have a 30-year-old root system. They'll also be up and producing within two years, instead of five. In a region where old vinifera vines are rare and the difficult economics of small-scale production constantly hangs over growers' heads, it's a double bonus endeavor that you'd think more growers there would opt for. Older native and hybrid varieties still abound in the region.

But re-grafting is a painstaking vine-by-vine process that requires highly skilled labor, which doesn't come cheaply. Then, growers have to hope the grafts take and the surgically altered vines survive their first winter. It's enough to cause some in the area to shake their heads when told about such a plan.

"If it were easy, everyone would do it," he says.

Argetsinger's farm has been in and out of his family's possession since his great-grandparents owned it in the late 19th century. Jim Hazlitt, one of the area's most important growers, owned it in the '60s and '70s, and planted vinifera grapes during his tenure. Eventually, Hazlitt was forced to sell, but he handpicked the farm's buyer.

"He didn't want houses up here, and he knew I wouldn't let that happen," says Argetsinger. "But truth be told, I didn't know a thing about farming grapes. I said to him, 'You think some dumb woodworker can handle grapes?' He just said, 'Sam, come out of the woods and take care of the land.' He knew how to get to me."

These days, Argetsinger finds himself managing the 100-acre property (with 33 acres of vines) full-time. Running the vineyard requires a level of dedication that surprised him. "I thought I'd do this when I wasn't in the woods. But a vineyard is all about timing. When something needs to be done, you better not miss it," Argetsinger says. "You need to be here all the time."

Damiani Wine Cellars

Two old-timers learn new tricks

Lou Damiani moved to the area as a child in the early 1960s, and has been in the fruit and grapegrowing business since the 1970s. Winemaking was a natural extension.

"It's pretty much developed into an obsessive passion," says Damiani, whose first commercial vintage with his own label was 2003. Damiani, 52, and his lifelong friend and fellow grapegrower Phil Davis, 57, are focusing primarily on reds, a decision that puts them in the minority in the Finger Lakes, where Riesling has risen to prominence.

Why reds? "Because that's our palate and we're two pretty stubborn guys," says Damiani, who talks in an almost perpetual half-laugh. "We want to prove we can make reds up here. I like Riesling, but I think it's been pushed too much, frankly, in terms of the other grapes that are grown here."

"You've got to have an ideal spot for reds, though," says Davis, who mostly plays the straight man to Damiani, though he has a quick, dry wit that flashes at times. "We're so on the edge climatewise for reds, it's got to be the right spot," he adds.

The men talk fondly of the Finger Lakes' pastoral history, when grapegrowing was easy as big wine companies provided a pressure-free selling environment. But both have embraced the new challenge of growing and making wines themselves, with an emphasis on quality.

Today, Damiani's 10 acres and Davis' 6 acres of vines form the backbone of the winery's 4,500-case production, which focuses on Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot, along with Pinot Noir, a new Syrah and small amounts of Riesling, Pinot Gris and Sauvignon Blanc. The duo buys grapes, a fairly common practice in the area, for about half their production, which is still developing its vineyard base.

"The glacial till has left so many pockets of differing soils, so there are certain sites that produce stuff you just can't get from your own estate," says Davis, walking down the steep slopes of one of their parcels.

As with other small, vinifera-focused wineries in the region, Damiani is seeing a new customer base coming to the tasting room. "Our customers are generally young people who seem to really care about what they're eating and drinking and where it comes from," he says.

Damiani's reds show nice dark fruit flavors and good tannic spines without being overly leafy or crisp, as many Finger Lakes reds are. The Riesling, from Argetsinger fruit, is dry and nervy in style. A new Syrah (just 20 cases to start) is Damiani and Davis' new pride and joy. It's peppery and lively, though lacking the flesh and depth of the Bordeaux varietals produced here. But it's part of the fun mix at Damiani, where experimentation is actually being fueled (rather than stifled) by experience.

Shalestone Winery

A red-wine specialist finds success

A few miles away, Rob Thomas is taking the red bent of Damiani even further—he produces only red wine at his Shalestone Winery.

Thomas, 54, has bright blond hair and a beard and mustache to match. He's got a softly weathered look, which matches his tone-soft but introspective as he talks about what he's seen in the region during his nearly 30-year tenure.

With a background in agronomy, Thomas ran a farm for the Taylor Wine Company in the early 1980s before working at Rolling Vineyards (the previous incarnation of Atwater Estate). From there he moved to Lamoreaux Landing in 1991, where he remained until 1998, shifting his focus from viticulture to winemaking.

But all the while, Thomas had been squirreling away his savings, working toward getting his own place. In 1980, he bought an overgrown peach orchard that had some Catawba grapes. While holding down his full-time jobs, he slowly renovated the property, building his own house, planting his first vinifera vines in 1986 and then vinifying his first Shalestone vintage in 1995. After leaving Lamoreaux, Thomas was on his own, and he's kept it that way

since.

"I've got a pretty tight crew," he says with half a smile. "My wife and son."

Production is a tiny 1,500 cases annually, of seven reds-four varietal bottlings (Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot and Pinot Noir) along with three red blends. He's also begun to experiment with Italian varieties, as well as Blaufränkisch, lately. But everything is done on a small scale-he has just 6 acres of vines.

His vines sit in very shallow soils, as opposed to the pockets of deep clay and gravel that run in a ribbon along Seneca Lake. Jagged pieces of shale stone jut up from the ground.

"Shalestone was the easiest winery name for anyone to ever come up with," he says.

While the vines cling to the rocky mix, the lack of deep topsoil leaves them exposed to the vagaries of damaging winter temperatures. It's a riskier spot than most sites in the area. The recent emergence of leaf roll virus in the region adds another headache, and Thomas replants vine by vine as necessary to keep his vineyard healthy and in full production. Overall though, he plans to keep things small and manageable for himself.

"When you've got 20 or 30 acres, there's always a pressure to get things done. My business plan is simple though. Everything is paid for and I do everything myself, but the job doesn't consume me," he says.

"When you grow [in size], you stop doing the things you were originally good at. You start becoming a manager, of people and resources, instead of a doer. So I prefer to stay small," he says without a whit of regret. Thomas seems completely satisfied with his position. He's not going to rush out and bang a drum for the region, but he'll happily join any team that pushes for quality, though he doesn't see a large player coming into the region anytime soon.

"Large commercial interests aren't here, and likely won't ever come. To be large-scale and successful, you have to eliminate risk and that's hard to do here. There's risk every growing season," says Thomas.

That risk comes in the form of unfriendly growing conditions, 2009 being a case in point, when wet, cool weather created difficult conditions for red varieties to ripen. Thomas will have his work cut out for him with '09 to fashion wines that show Shalestone's typical polished feel with ripe, bright berry flavors. It's a challenge Thomas takes in stride.

"The sky is the limit here in the Finger Lakes," he says.

- [James Molesworth's Recommended Finger Lakes Wines \(in PDF Format\)](#)