



Workers sort grapes at Hermann J. Wiemer, which produced this report's top-rated wine.

A NEW BENCHMARK

The warm, dry 2016 vintage raises the bar for the Finger Lakes | By James Molesworth

Upstate New York's Finger Lakes region has come a long way. The area has shrugged off its reputation as a cottage industry built on a hodgepodge of quantity-driven hybrid and native grapes. The number of top producers has grown, and there's better focus to their offerings, which rely primarily on Riesling. It's not yet a world-class wine region—the critical mass of quality isn't quite there. But if more vintages like 2016 come along, it won't be long before the Finger Lakes can lay claim to that mantle.

Marked by a very dry and warm—but not hot—growing season, the 2016 vintage gave Finger Lakes vintners a year free of the region's typical disease pressures, which are generally caused by humidity. Grape bunches were smaller due to the drought, so yields were reduced.

But with hydric stress essentially the one threat to the vintage, growers saw the chance to do something special. When

much-needed rains fell late in the season, providing some relief and allowing the ripening process to continue, many producers made the most of the opportunity.

The 2016 Rieslings are fresh, pure and focused, while the region's other white and red varieties also performed very well. This is the Finger Lakes' best vintage since 2012, and consumers should pounce now while the wines dominate most producers' current releases. Overall, I rate the 2016 vintage 93 points.

Since my last report on the region ("Finger Lakes Passes Another Test in 2015," Jan. 31 – Feb. 28, 2017), I have reviewed nearly 250 wines in blind tastings at our New York office. More than 40 of them achieved outstanding ratings of 90 points or higher on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale, while an additional 170 wines earned very good ratings of 85 to 89 points, easily the best showing for the region since I began covering it in 2000. (A free alphabetical list of scores and

prices for all wines tasted is available at WineSpectator.com/063018.)

This report primarily covers wines produced from vinifera grapes, as opposed to those made from hybrid or native grapes. Although the latter still comprise the majority of the region's plantings—accounting for more than 70 percent of the 9,300-plus acres of vines (as of 2011, when the last formal agricultural survey was conducted)—it is vinifera varieties, led by Riesling, that are producing the best wines.

Growers have begun to shift their focus accordingly in recent years by planting more vinifera, with Riesling and Cabernet Franc the main focuses. Today, vinifera plantings total an estimated 2,800 acres, approximately 1,300 of which are Riesling. Both of these figures represent notable increases from the 2011 survey, which counted 2,155 acres of vinifera and 1,000 of Riesling. Of the 130 wineries now operating in the region, 30 have wines in this report that earned ratings of 88 points or higher, a marked increase over the past decade.

L leading the way this year is the Hermann J. Wiemer Riesling Seneca Lake Late Harvest Single Select 2016 (94 points, \$45), a lush dessert-style wine that displays creamed apricot, tangerine and nectarine notes that stay refined and focused thanks to light orange blossom, citrus oil and jasmine hints. The bottling is a special one-off, made from a single picking of 50 percent botrytized fruit rather than a blend of several pickings.

"This is the first time with any wine since I have been at Wiemer that we have done that," says owner and winemaker Fred Merwarth,



who ran out of time before heavy rains fell on Oct. 20, forcing him to stop picking. With some fruit in his Josef vineyard still hanging, Merwarth gambled and left it, waiting until early November to pick. "We held off picking until the concentration returned on November 3," he says. "However, due to the amount of rain and ripeness of the fruit, botrytis took off like crazy, going from no more than 5 percent before the rain to well over 50 percent infection post-rain."

The wine's 94-point rating makes it the highest-rated Finger Lakes wine in the history of *Wine Spectator*. Other top releases include Wiemer's Riesling Seneca Lake HJW Vineyard 2016 (93, \$39), Forge's Riesling Finger Lakes

Leidenfrost Vineyard 2016 (93, \$24) and Ravines' late-release Riesling Finger Lakes Dry Argetsinger Vineyard 2014 (93, \$30).

As usual, Riesling dominates the best offerings as well as the overall number of wines reviewed, representing more than half the wines in this report and nearly all of those at 90-plus. Other leading releases can be found from Keuka Lake Vineyards, Domaine LeSeurre, Empire Estate, Red Newt Cellars, The Element, Sheldrake Point, Lamoreaux Landing and Silver Thread.

"2016 will go down as a unique vintage in the Finger Lakes region," says Morten Hallgren, owner and winemaker of Ravines.



Vineyards across the Finger Lakes region made excellent wines in the 2016 vintage, which saw a very dry growing season that produced smaller-than-average yields.

"Because of the combination of early budbreak, a very warm and sunny growing season and significant drought toward the end of the season, we ended up with a crop of very ripe, small berries. Overall, yields were down an average of 30 percent to 35 percent, most notably affecting Riesling. The resulting wines most closely resemble the 2012 vintage, but pushed a little further in terms of ripeness and potential for extraction. The whites have developed riper aromatics, the acidity is a little softer and the mouthfeel a little richer."

The Ravines Riesling Finger Lakes Dry White Springs Vineyard 2016 (91, \$23) is a typical example of the vintage, with purity and cut to the jasmine, white peach, lemon curd and star fruit notes, inlaid with seamless acidity and extending through the long, mineral-tinged finish. Starting with the 2017 vintage, Ravines' wines are 100-percent estate-grown, from 130 acres of vineyards. Ravines is one of the leading wineries in the Finger Lakes, and in keeping with the region's burgeoning emphasis on wine tourism, it now houses a restaurant offering lunch and dinner.

"2014 was a much cooler and less sunny year, so the wines have marked acidity," says Silver Thread co-owner and winemaker Shannon Brock, comparing 2016 to previous years. "2015 was average, with late-season warmth leading to lower-than-normal acidity. The 2016s are more of a happy medium. The aromatic whites from 2016 have a lovely freshness paired with good flavor intensity." The Silver Thread Riesling Seneca Lake STV Estate Vineyard 2016 (90, \$26) is another textbook example from the Finger Lakes.

But while Riesling leads the pack, there is diversity from the region worth exploring. There are 42 whites in this report made from grapes other than Riesling, with 32 of them earning ratings of 85 points or higher. Chardonnay continues to produce tantalizing results, particularly versions without significant oak influence, and varieties such as Gewürztraminer and Pinot Gris also impress.

Furthermore, there is good value to be found among these other whites. The Atwater Estate Pinot Gris Finger Lakes 2016 (88, \$18), Heron Hill Chardonnay Finger Lakes Unoaked 2016 (87, \$16) and Silver Thread Gewürztraminer Finger Lakes STV Estate Vineyard 2016 (86, \$18) all offer very good quality at modest prices.



Morten and Lisa Hallgren of Ravines achieved success with Riesling in 2016, releasing one of the year's best wines. As of 2017, all of their wines are made exclusively with estate-grown fruit, from 130 acres of vineyards.

Red wines take a backseat in the Finger Lakes but continue to show improvement as well. Of the 56 reds in this report, 41 earn ratings of 85 points or higher. Forge's Pinot Noir Finger Lakes Les Alliés 2015 (90, \$32) is an alluring, silky wine marked with gently mulled cherry fruit. The Schneider & Bieler Cabernet Franc Finger Lakes Le Breton 2015 (89, \$20) is a very solid version, with a core of dark cherry and black currant flavors liberally laced with tobacco and bay leaf notes.

Along with the region's eye-opening quality in 2016, a number of new producers continue to bolster the lineup. Empire Estate, Trestle 31 and The Element are all relatively new operations, joining the parade of already established producers such as Wiener, Ravines and Forge. (For more on these new faces, see "Wineries to Watch" on page 72.) Empire Estate and Trestle 31 rely on Riesling, while The Element offers a wide portfolio that harks back to the scattershot approach of the region, showing that the Finger Lakes' days of tinkering and experimentation are far from over.

Senior editor James Molesworth is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of the Finger Lakes.

Rating Finger Lakes Vintages

2016	93	Season got off to a slow start with cool weather early. Dry and warm (but not hot) weather in the second half helped the vines to catch up on ripening. Dry conditions persisted through harvest, limiting disease pressures and allowing producers to pick leisurely. Yields down slightly, but quality is high and consistent across varieties	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2015	88	A rainy June led to heightened disease pressures. A premium on viticulture, then careful selection at harvest was paramount for quality. Inconsistent overall, particularly for reds, though there are some excellent dry Rieslings and other whites	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2014	90	Record-breaking cold winter led to significant winter kill, resulting in low yields. Wet and cool spring led to a late-running season, but an ideal Indian summer let vineyards catch up on ripening. Rieslings are racy, fresh and pure; Pinot Noir also promising	<i>Drink or hold</i>
2013	87	A wet growing season led to higher-than-usual disease pressures. Best growers managed canopies and crop yields to avoid rot. Riesling performed well, best bottlings decidedly dry in style	<i>Drink</i>
2012	92	An early spring was followed by a long, warm and dry season and an earlier-than-usual harvest. Some late rains helped the vines finish the ripening after the drought. A consistent vintage; very high quality, with excellent acidity	<i>Drink or hold</i>

Vintage ratings: 95–100, classic; 90–94, outstanding; 85–89, very good; 80–84, good; 75–79, mediocre; 50–74, not recommended. **Drinkability:** "NYR" means most of the wines of the vintage are yet to be released; "drink" means most of the wines of the vintage are ready to drink; "hold" means most of the age-worthy wines have yet to fully mature.

James Molesworth's Recommended Finger Lakes Wines

Nearly 250 wines were reviewed for this report. A free alphabetical list is available at WineSpectator.com/063018. WineSpectator.com members can access complete reviews for all wines tasted using the online Wine Ratings search.

WINE	SCORE	PRICE	WINE	SCORE	PRICE
HERMANN J. WIEMER Riesling Seneca Lake Late Harvest Single Select 2016 Lush and inviting, with creamed apricot, tangerine and nectarine notes that stay refined and focused. Shows an overall sense of grace.	94	\$45	ATWATER ESTATE Pinot Gris Finger Lakes 2016 There's good zip to the grapefruit rind, Meyer lemon, verbena and white peach flavors in this fresh white.	88	\$18
FORGE Riesling Finger Lakes Leidenfrost Vineyard 2016 Rich and intense, offering persimmon, orange blossom, lemon curd and citrus oil flavors, this version has breadth and depth.	93	\$24	BILLSBORO Riesling Finger Lakes Dry Sawmill Creek Vineyards 2016 Bright, with yellow apple, white peach and honeysuckle notes carried by finely beaded acidity. Shows length and cut through the finish.	88	\$17
RAVINES Riesling Finger Lakes Dry Argetsinger Vineyard 2014 Distinctive, with ginger peel, jasmine, yellow apple, nectarine and bitter almond notes underscored by mouthwatering acidity.	93	\$30	DAMIANI Gewürztraminer Finger Lakes Sunrise Hill Vineyards 2015 This has a viscous feel, with grapefruit oil, bitter orange, lychee and rose water notes melding together and lingering on the finish.	88	\$19
HERMANN J. WIEMER Riesling Seneca Lake HJW Vineyard 2016 Bright and pure, offering a racy beam of yellow apple, white peach, chamomile and lemon pith, with flashes of talc and dried chamomile.	93	\$39	J.R. DILL Riesling Seneca Lake Dry 2016 Fresh and lively, with yellow apple, white ginger and honeysuckle notes breezing through. Shows good energy through the finish.	88	\$16
FORGE Riesling Finger Lakes Lower Caywood Vineyard 2016 Long and lively, with a delightful display of chamomile, honeysuckle, yellow apple and quince notes underscored by fine minerality.	92	\$24	THE ELEMENT The Element Finger Lakes 2013 Singed cinnamon streaks a core of dried cherry and red currant fruit, ending with vanilla and blood orange hints. Cabernet Franc and Syrah.	88	\$43
KEUKA LAKE VINEYARDS Riesling Finger Lakes Semi-Dry 2016 Pure and well-defined, offering white peach, jasmine, honeysuckle, yellow apple and mirabelle plum notes that are bright and engaging.	92	\$17	FOX RUN Cabernet Franc Finger Lakes 2015 Fresh, with ripe cherry and plum compote notes that have good depth and energy, backed by light cocoa and tobacco twinges.	88	\$22
FORGE Riesling Finger Lakes Classique 2016 Rich and focused, with citrus oil, jasmine, yellow apple and mirabelle plum notes carrying through the straw-tinged finish.	91	\$19	GLENORA Riesling Finger Lakes 2016 On the off-dry side, with friendly star fruit, yellow apple, white ginger and quince flavors that breeze through the open finish.	88	\$14
HERMANN J. WIEMER Riesling Seneca Lake Dry Reserve 2016 This has a lovely mix of Jonagold apple, jasmine, salted butter and white peach flavors that stream through the finish in lockstep.	91	\$29	HERON HILL Chardonnay Finger Lakes Ingle Vineyard Unoaked 2016 Fresh and forward, showing pear and apple notes lined with a ver-bena thread. Flashes some zip through the finish.	88	\$25
FORGE Riesling Finger Lakes Sawmill Creek Vineyard 2016 Offers solid ripeness, with notes of yellow apple, jasmine, persimmon and citrus oil. The finish is lengthy, with creamy edges.	90	\$24	HOSMER Riesling Cayuga Lake Single Wheel Patrician Verona Vineyard 2016 Fresh chamomile, white peach and yellow apple fruit flavors breeze through, with lively acidity. This has energy and persistence.	88	\$20
LAMOREAUX LANDING Riesling Finger Lakes Yellow Dog Vineyard 2016 A bright, high-pitched style, with Key lime, meringue, chamomile and quinine notes zipping through. For fans of the dry style.	90	\$24	DOMAINE LESEURRE Chardonnay Finger Lakes Barrel Select 2015 Tasty, offering creamed pear and fig notes gently coated with brioche and butter accents. Delivers an alluring creamy feel through the finish.	88	\$27
RAVINES Riesling Finger Lakes Dry 2016 Very lively, with good cut from start to finish, as peach, yellow and green apple and honeysuckle notes stream through.	90	\$18	RED NEWT CELLARS Riesling Finger Lakes Circle Label 2016 Fresh and forward, offering a mix of lime, pear and green apple notes, with good energy despite the slightly off-dry finish.	88	\$15
EMPIRE ESTATE Riesling Finger Lakes Dry 2016 Fresh and racy, with pretty jasmine, white peach and jicama notes that stay taut and chiseled through the finish.	89	\$18	ROOSTER HILL Riesling Finger Lakes Dry 2016 Peach, fennel, lime and slate flavors stretch through the taut finish. Shows an anise echo at the end while maintaining tension.	88	\$18
SCHNEIDER & BIELER Cabernet Franc Finger Lakes Le Breton 2015 Really solid, with a core of dark cherry and black currant preserve flavors liberally laced with tobacco and bay leaf notes.	89	\$20	SHELDRAKE POINT Chardonnay Finger Lakes 2016 Fresh, showing yellow apple fruit layered with a flash of fennel. Brisk lime and lemon zest notes accent the finish.	88	\$18
TRESTLE 31 Riesling Finger Lakes 2015 Distinctive, offering a mix of yellow apple, pear and jasmine notes that show a rather rounded feel, with underlying tension.	89	\$29	SILVER THREAD Riesling Finger Lakes Semi-Dry 2016 There's a plump hint to the mix of yellow apple, ginger and tangerine flavors in this white, with a light bitter almond note through the finish.	88	\$18
240 DAYS Riesling Finger Lakes 2016 Lively, with a mix of peach, yellow apple and lemon curd notes that are plump through the middle but racy along the edges.	89	\$28	THREE BROTHERS Riesling Finger Lakes Medium Sweet 2 Degrees 2016 An open, breezy style, showing peach, yellow apple and anise notes, with a rounded, friendly finish that has an off-dry hint.	88	\$16
VILLA BELLANGELO Riesling Seneca Lake Dry 2015 Fresh, with verbena and honeysuckle notes leading the way for yellow apple and white peach flavors. Shows a flash of chamomile.	89	\$17	WAGNER Riesling Finger Lakes Dry 2016 Light and crunchy, with makrut lime, verbena and pippin apple notes that stay bright through the finish.	88	\$15

WINERIES TO WATCH

Four vintners shaping the future of the Finger Lakes | By Emma Balter

Winemakers in the Finger Lakes have worked hard to better their wines and bolster their region's reputation. More and more wine lovers are paying attention, but what's next for the area's vintners? By pushing quality forward, implementing sustainable practices, championing grapes other than Riesling and expanding distribution, the four producers below are trying to cement the Finger Lakes' standing in the world of fine wine.



Christopher Bates of Element

Element

"I got to watch our entire economy crumble as a kid," says Christopher Bates, describing upstate New York, where he grew up, when companies like Kodak and Xerox left the area. "I want to create a long-term economy." Bates is glad the Finger Lakes' wine industry is thriving today, but his focus is on ensuring its longevity.

Bates and his wife, Isabel Bogadtke, own a hospitality company that includes the restaurants FLX Winery, FLX Table and FLX Fry Bird. They started their winery, Element, as a side venture in 2009. It operates primarily as a *négociant*, buying fruit from different vineyards, producers and *terroirs*, and experimenting with a cornucopia of grapes, including Riesling, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, Syrah, Merlot, Lemberger and Gewürztraminer.

"I'm a tinkerer," Bates says. The wines are aged in neutral oak barrels and released when he thinks they're ready. (You'll find most of the current releases with at least three years of bottle age.)

His goal is to define what a given grape variety tastes like in the Finger Lakes and establish a blueprint for others. He considers himself a champion of Syrah in the region, and believes Chardonnay, Lemberger, Merlot and Pinot Noir in particular have a great future here. Cabernet Franc, he says, is the variety that the most people can have the most success with; it's easy to grow and easy to make. In general, he thinks making red wines in the Finger Lakes is very important. (As for Riesling, he stopped making it after the 2014 vintage: "I'm not adding to the conversation.")

Bates made a move when a vineyard came up for sale last year: 30 acres on the east side of Seneca Lake, with 17 acres planted to Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Syrah, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Other than the Cabernet Sauvignon, which he plans to tear out, this was everything he wanted to grow. With the purchase, the winery is entering a new chapter, transitioning from buying other producers' fruit to vinifying its own.

Certain business decisions, however, will remain crucial to Bates' vision. He considers himself a price leader; Element wines cost between \$20 and \$60, which is high for the region. The Finger Lakes is not a cheap place to make wine, he says, and vintners need to charge more for it so they can make better products and be competitive with other regions.

But in order to compete, the wines also need to be available, so Bates recently stepped up his distribution. He fears a huge opportunity will pass the region by if people read about the wines but can't find anywhere to buy them. "I don't want this to be a flash in the pan for us," he says. "I want to create an industry."

Empire Estate

Thomas Pastuszak was a pre-med student at Cornell University when he started working in restaurants and developed a passion for wine and the hospitality industry. He never made it to medical school. After 10 years in the Finger Lakes, working in local restaurants and helping out at wineries in the region, he moved back to his native New York City in 2011 for a sommelier job at Colicchio & Sons.

"I realized that nobody in New York City really knew about the quality Finger Lakes producers that I loved and was championing," he says. The wines were rarely found on wine lists in the city, even though their source is in its backyard. Around the time Pastuszak opened the NoMad in 2014, a hotel and restaurant where he works as wine director, he started the Empire Estate project in partnership with Red Newt Cellars, where he makes the wine with the help of winemaker Kelby Russell.

Pastuszak has a singular focus: to produce a dry Finger Lakes Riesling that embodies what the region does best. It's a lean, mineral, savory style that hails from dozens of vineyards in the region. Most of them are found on the east and west sides of Seneca Lake, with two parcels on the west side of Cayuga Lake, and they are grown on a multitude of soils: shale, slate, gravel,

limestone, clay and Honeoye loam. "There are so many remarkable sites, and we wanted to support them," he says, adding that the vineyards are intentionally selected to provide variety in terms of location, soil and exposure.

Empire Estate started with 900 cases. It has since grown to 5,000 cases with the 2017 vintage, and can be found in 46 states nationwide—and on many New York wine lists. "We're really trying to raise awareness for the area," says Pastuszak. He hopes that people will start asking their sommeliers and retailers what else is made in the Finger Lakes.

He and his wife, Jessica Brown, have another project, Terrassen Cellars, which focuses on red and rosé bottlings made from Cabernet Franc, Gamay and Blaufränkisch. "Many people still believe that you cannot produce delicious red wines in the Finger Lakes," Pastuszak says. He intends to prove them wrong.

Standing Stone

Tom and Martha Macinski founded Standing Stone in the early 1990s on a beautiful sloping spot on Seneca Lake's east bank. But now, after nearly three decades, the couple has decided to retire. In June of last year, they sold their property and 50 acres of vineyards to Fred Merwarth and Oskar Bynke of their celebrated neighbor, Hermann J. Wiemer, and will be slowly transitioning out of the operation.

"You have to see this as almost a start-up project," says Bynke. "We're going back to the basics." The new team is reevaluating everything and getting to know the site. They'll be looking at what works and what doesn't over the next couple years and figuring out what to focus on moving forward. But a few decisions have been made already. The Vidal Blanc that made the property's ice wine is being torn out due to the vines' poor health. (Pinot Blanc will likely replace it.) The old-vine Riesling that was planted in 1972 used to make two single-vineyard cuvées, which could be discontinued and made into something different. For now, a regular dry Riesling, a

Gewürztraminer and a Chardonnay will be sold under the label.

When the Wiemer team came in, they asked Jessica Johnson, the Standing Stone winemaker who is staying on, what she wanted to make. Her response: Saperavi rosé. The winery had used the grape in its red wines, both in a varietal bottling and in a blend, but Johnson's idea was a first. "We find it to be a really unique variety," she says. "I'm always excited to play with it." The inaugural 2017 vintage is distinctly savory, with the piercingly high acidity that is typical of the grape.

Changes will be made in the vineyard as well, starting with the elimination of herbicides and pesticides, and the adoption of organic and biodynamic farming practices. Harvest will be conducted with several passes through the vineyards to capture optimal ripeness, replicating the process done by the meticulous team at Wiemer. A renovation of the old Civil War-era cellars, as well as the tasting room, is also in store. This transition is one to watch as the new ownership settles in and develops a unique identity in the years to come.

Trestle 31 and 240 Days

"When are you making me a Finger Lakes Riesling?" Rob Sands, CEO of Constellation Brands, asked Nova Cadamatre one day as she walked into a team meeting. Cadamatre, who was working for Robert Mondavi Winery in California at the time, had been hinting that the beverage giant should stake a claim in the region. In 2015, 240 Days was born, along with Trestle 31, Cadamatre's own project, which she runs with her husband, Brian.

Cadamatre is a South Carolina native who came to upstate New York to study horticulture. "I just wanted to grow things," she says. Being close to wine country sparked her interest in growing grapes; she volunteered for wineries and eventually transferred to Cornell University's viticulture and enology program. There weren't many jobs in the Finger Lakes when she graduated, so she moved to California and spent almost a decade there

working for Treasury Wine Estates and Constellation until she returned to the East Coast. Both 240 Days and Trestle 31 wines are produced at the Fox Run winery. For the former, Cadamatre makes a Riesling from vineyards located on southern Seneca Lake, both east and west; it is partly barrel-fermented, around 20 percent, and she leaves a touch of sugar. It's a more traditional style of Riesling, she says, made for a wider audience. She also makes a Cabernet Franc and a Blaufränkisch for the label, which are both barrel-fermented in a mix of new, used and neutral oak barrels. She performs a saignée on both, some of which will go into the rosé.

For the Trestle 31 Riesling, Cadamatre opted for a different style. The grapes hail from Zugibe Vineyard on the north side of Seneca, where she says the *terroir* lends more structure to the wines. The Riesling goes through two hours of skin contact and four to five days of cold settling, sees no oak and is bone-dry. She's also making Chardonnay for the first time this year, from the Nut Road site west of Seneca. She believes Chardonnay has a real future in the Finger Lakes. Hers is currently aging in one-third new French oak and two-thirds stainless steel.

At the same time that she started these two projects, Cadamatre, eager to get back into grapegrowing, bought 12 acres of land very close to Zugibe, which she hopes to plant in the next five years. The current plan is 6 acres of Riesling, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.



The Cadamatre family of Trestle 31