

[Food](#)

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In New York's Finger Lakes, it's mostly about grapes



The microclimate along the Finger Lakes is good for vineyards. The region in Western New York is the No. 3 producer of wine in the nation.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier
By Katherine Rodeghier
Daily Herald Correspondent

Native American lore says the Great Spirit laid his hands on the Earth in a blessing, creating the long, narrow lakes that spread across Western New York.

That spirit must have had polydactyl extremities because the Finger Lakes region comprises 11 main lakes and a smattering of smaller ones. Or, perhaps the teller of the myth had drunk too much of the wine the Finger Lakes is famous for and miscounted.

Whatever. Wine and the Finger Lakes go, uh, hand in hand.

New York ranks as the third-largest wine-producing state in the country (California overwhelmingly gets No. 1, Washington just squeaks in at No. 2). The Finger Lakes is the state's largest wine region and is still growing with 120 wineries and counting.

The deepest and largest of these glacier-carved lakes create a microclimate moderating fluctuations in temperature. Sloping shorelines expose the vines to maximum sunshine, good for grapes, great for wine.

Touring the entire Finger Lakes region, stretching south of I-90 between Rochester and Syracuse, would take a big chunk of vacation time. Confining yourself to Ontario County, with two of the largest lakes and two wine trails, will give you a good taste not only of local wine but also some of the area's scenic and cultural charms.

Sipping along the lakes

Nearly three dozen wineries lie on the Seneca Lake Wine Trail. Soil and growing conditions along this, the deepest of the Finger Lakes at 618 feet, support not only the hardy native grapes of the region but also fussier varieties such as chardonnay, cabernet franc, pinot noir and riesling. In fact, the area often is compared to Germany's Rhineland, famous for its rieslings.



A wine-tasting room is only part of the appeal of Belhurst Castle. It also has a spa, restaurants and overnight lodging. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Start tasting at the winery at Belhurst Castle, a 19th-century estate with restaurants, a spa and hotel rooms (castle guests open a wine safe with their room key for complimentary vino). The sweet Carrie Blush takes its name from the wealthy woman who built the castle and had her prized golden pheasants roaming the lawn. Another bottle, simply called Red, pays tribute to "Red" Dwyer who operated a speak-easy and casino in the castle in the 1930s, running booze down from Canada.

Prohibition, along with a phylloxera blight and competition from California, took a toll on the wine industry in the Finger Lakes. Many vineyards were replanted with grapes more conducive to juice and fresh fruit. During World War

II, some 4,000 POWs from Germany and Italy worked on farms harvesting grapes and other produce. The comeback for wineries came in the 1970s when European viticulturalists planted vines around the lakes.

In 1976, the state passed a law easing taxes and regulations for winemakers and the number of wineries has grown ever since.

The wine trail along Canandaigua Lake, stretching south from the county seat of Canandaigua, passes some of the priciest homes in the country on its western shore and some of the nicest scenery. Stop at the overlook on the High Road (County Route 12) for a gorgeous view of the lake and surrounding hillsides.

Start your wine tasting on the Canandaigua Trail at Sonnenberg Gardens & Mansion State Historic Park, a 50-acre estate with a Victorian home built in 1887 and nine formal gardens. It also houses the Finger Lakes Wine Center showcasing more than 40 wineries with daily wine tastings May through October.



Manager Josh Zubrzyski pours for guests at Heron Hill Winery. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Family-run Heron Hill Winery, established in 1977 shortly after the state law took effect, focuses on sustainable viticulture and recognizes riesling as the flagship of the region, but offers more than 20 wine varieties. Its tasting room near Bristol, its third location, occupies a renovated century-old barn overlooking its vineyards.

To make its ice wine, workers must harvest the frozen grapes between 2 and 5 a.m. Perhaps that justifies the price of \$50 a bottle for this sweet drink with 16 percent residual sugar.

John Brahm, owner of Arbor Hill Grapery reintroduced to the region Vergennes grape wine, named for the city in Vermont, and became the first to make a spicy, semisweet white wine made from traminette grapes, a cross between a French-American hybrid and a German cultivar made at the University of Illinois.

The company produces more than 18 wines as well as 45-plus gourmet foods and finishing sauces and has been featured on the Food Network show "Food Finds."



Inspire Moore winery and tasting room are open for business on the Canandaigua Wine Trail. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Inspire Moore Winery & Vineyard produces 12 wines and is known for its dry rosé and its blaufrankisch, a varietal with roots in Austria. Hazlitt's Red Cat Cellars, formerly the historic Widmer Winery, makes the popular Red Cat from native catawba grapes. Legend has it that the founder's sons took some of their father's homemade wine for a waterfront party, the centerpiece of which was a hot tub where more clothing was discarded as more wine was consumed. Look for the bottle with a red cat in a hot tub on the label.

Enough wine, already

How about a beer? New York state once grew 90 percent of the nation's hops and the Finger Lakes had more than 50 breweries. Prohibition put a dent in that, too, but breweries are back along with farms planting hops.

Nedloh Brewing Co. opened in October 2014, with a microbrewery, tasting room and hops museum. Owned by the daughter and son-in-law of the owners of Heron Hill Winery, the brewery uses locally grown hops for what it calls "farm-to-pint freshness."

Brew & Brats, housed in a 150-year-old carriage house at Arbor Hill Winery, serves local craft brews Frog Hollow Pale Ale, Gully Washer IPA and Turtle Crawl Porter, among others. It also partners with a local sausage maker to create its bratwurst made with Arbor Hill Sherried Wine BBQ Sauce.



Relaxed taxes and regulations spurred the growth of vineyards in the Finger Lakes region of Western New York. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

You'll gain a greater appreciation of food and drink at the New York Wine & Culinary Center on the Canandaigua Lake Pier. At this nonprofit showcasing agriculture in New York state, you can sample wine, beer and spirits in its tasting room, watch a chef whip up a meal in the 50-seat Demonstration Theater and don an apron to go hands-on in a cooking class. Rather leave the cooking to someone else? Dine on locally sourced foods at the center's Upstairs Bistro. If the weather is fine, snag a table on the deck for a view of the lake.

You won't find a food more local or more traditional than the white corn products sold at the Ganondagan State Historic Site where 4,500 Native Americans lived in the 17th century. Dedicated workers for the Iroquois White Corn Project hand-plant heirloom seeds to restore this crop destroyed when troops of French King Louis XIV burned longhouses and fields in a dispute over the fur trade. You can buy white corn flour and dehydrated corn -- picked, husked and processed by hand -- at a farmhouse on the site.

You also can tour a replica of a bark longhouse where you'll learn how the Seneca, one of six nations in the Iroquois Confederacy, lived. For more detail, visit the \$13.25 million Seneca Art & Culture Center that opened last fall with an interactive multimedia gallery, auditorium and theater featuring a film on the Iroquois creation story.

You might even learn more about that Great Spirit who laid hands on the Finger Lakes.

- Information for this article was gathered during a writers' conference sponsored by the Finger Lakes Visitors Connection.

New York's Finger Lakes

Information: Finger Lakes Visitors Connection, (877) 386-4669, visitfingerlakes.com/

Lodging:

Belhurst Castle, 4069 W. Lake Road, Geneva; rooms in the castle, adjoining Vinifera Inn and nearby White Springs Manor; (315) 781-0201, belhurst.com/

The Inn on the Lake, 770 S. Main St., Canandaigua; three-diamond hotel on Lake Canandaigua; (800) 228-2801, theinnonthelake.com/

Driving: No designated driver? Consider hiring a limo or booking a winery tour.

Finger Lakes Limousine & Coach, (888) 252-1768, fingerlakeslimo.com/

Finger Lakes Winery Tours, (315) 828-6289, ingerlakeswinerytours.com/

Crush on Canandaigua, (855) 862-7874, crushbeerwinetours.com/signature-beer-and-wine-tours/crush-on-canandaigua/

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