



Water to Wine

|
**NEW YORK'S
FINGER LAKES ARE
EXPERIENCING
A QUIET
TRANSFORMATION**

*by Paul Brady
photographs by Paola & Murray*



“This is why we’re here,”

says Susan Higgins, standing amid yellow wildflowers and pinot noir vines on a ridge overlooking Cayuga Lake. In the shade of a maple tree, she’s showing me the hunks of limestone she and her husband, Tom, pulled from the ground. A huge vein of the stuff, deposited here roughly 400 million years ago, balances the pH of the soil—and makes it possible to coax quality fruit from their three-and-a-half acres despite Upstate New York’s reputation for brutal winters and a short growing season. The Higginses, whose Heart & Hands Wine Company released its first vintage in 2006 and who are now some of the region’s most lauded winemakers, were onto something. There’s a special alchemy to this place, where rolling hills frame glacial lakes, clear streams carve deep gorges through the shale, and plucky, self-reliant entrepreneurs are turning what was a Rust Belt backwater into one of the country’s most appealing summertime destinations.

At a time when everyone seems to have their own short list of restaurants in Mexico City and their favorite hotel in Tokyo, the hidden-in-plain-sight Finger Lakes remain largely undiscovered, a 14-county sweep of forests and farmland, four to five hours northwest of New York City by car. The 11 long, skinny lakes, formed by advancing glaciers 2 million years ago, don’t just inspire the name but dictate the slow, rural pace of life. There are no bridges or ferries crossing the lakes, so you always seem to be driving the long way around. Not that you’ll mind: When I first started coming here, as a college student, my buddies and I would set out from Rochester with a cooler of cheese and charcuterie, and buy a few bottles of wine at whatever vineyard had a picnic table set out. Back in those pre-*Sideways*, pre-social-media days, tasting rooms were little more than a corner of a barn where someone had slapped a piece of lumber over two old barriques, and you could get a flight of pours for a dollar or two, or maybe for nothing at all if you promised to tell your friends to visit.

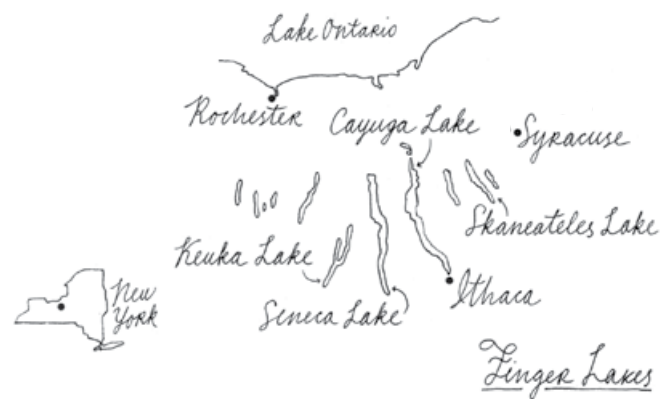
In the 15 or so years since, the fresh-from-the-farm vibe has remained largely the same, but the wine has vastly improved. “The region is more exciting than it’s ever been,” says Thomas Pastuszak, the wine director at the NoMad Hotel in New York City, who started making his own label, Empire Estate, in the region in 2014, collaborating with Kelby Russell, a winemaker at Red Newt Cellars. “There’s a push in quality that the region’s never really seen before,” Pastuszak adds. You find it at Bloomer Creek Vineyard, where





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PREVIOUS SPREAD, FROM
LEFT: WATERFALLS AT
WATKINS GLEN STATE
PARK; CABERNET
SAUVIGNON GRAPES
AT THE SHELDRAKE
POINT WINERY. THIS
PAGE: CHATEAU
FRANK, THE HISTORIC
STONE BUILDING
AT DR. KONSTANTIN
FRANK'S WINERY.



Map by Peter Oumanski

husband-and-wife team Kim Engle and Debra Bermingham pour electric single-vineyard whites and Bordeaux-inspired reds in a tiny tasting room you'd drive right past if you didn't know to look for it. At Boundary Breaks, a small-batch producer run by Bruce Murray, who used to host tastings in his own kitchen, they've just built a new space overlooking Seneca Lake, where you can geek out on clone-specific rieslings. And at Shaw Vineyard, where the wood-beamed tasting room is still as lo-fi as they come, owner Steve Shaw is making outré orange wines and seriously good cabernet sauvignon.

Yet as far as the wines have come, the true appeal of the Finger Lakes is that its small towns retain their white-picket-fence "Norman Rockwell-painting" feel, as bartender and manager Matt Stevenson puts it over lunch at Fargo Bar & Grill, the wood-paneled pub not far from Heart & Hands in the tiny town of Aurora, on Cayuga Lake. The ethos of the village owes largely to Pleasant Rowland, who graduated from Wells College, the 600-student school here, and went on to sell her American Girl empire to Mattel for a reported \$700 million. She's since spent a healthy chunk of that to convert several historic buildings into the Inns of Aurora, a network of guesthouses. (My favorite is Rowland House, which feels more like the lakeside retreat of a lovable eccentric great-aunt than a stilted B&B.) Skaneateles, a tidy lakeside village with a gazebo bandstand at waterfront Clift Park, is another holdover from the *Leave It to Beaver* era: Pontoon boats and Chris-Craft bowriders tie up at the municipal dock; the soft-serve machines at Doug's Fish Fry whirl





◉ FROM LEFT: CRUISING KEUKA LAKE; DINNER AT LE CAFÉ CENT-DIX IN ITHACA; A LEMON-BLUEBERRY DESSERT AT THE ELDERBERRY POND FARM RESTAURANT.

all afternoon; and local institutions like Sherwood Inn serve (thankfully) updated versions of country-club cuisine—shrimp cocktail, Yankee pot roast, big Bloody Marys—to locals dressed head to toe in Syracuse University gear. It's the sort of place where you'll find a dinghy regatta underway, though most people won't care much who wins, as long as the race is over in time for Gibsons at The Krebs, an ambitiously formal restaurant that's been here, in one location or another, since 1899.

For all the nostalgia, though, the Finger Lakes are today at an inflection point that felt almost unimaginable back when my friends and I were in college, renting ramshackle share cottages on the waterfront. We'd spend the mornings hiking through the region's state parks, like Watkins Glen (with its 19 waterfalls) or Taughannock Falls (with its impressive

Gorge Trail), before an afternoon of swigging riesling and fishing, at dusk, from a beat-up aluminum Jon boat. "It's always been a good place for outdoor activities, for camping, for summering," says Pastuszak, "but it was less accessible before—people didn't know what to look for. Social media has helped a lot." That's enabled not just winemakers but chefs, distillers, innkeepers, craftspeople, and designers to connect with bigger markets—and lure more tourists than ever to places like Geneva, a small town at the north end of Seneca Lake, where, Pastuszak says, "Linden Street has blown up and become this little restaurant alley." It's now getting a national profile thanks in large part to FLX Table, an innovative, almost-experimental restaurant that opened in 2016.

One warm summer evening last September, Christopher Bates was there in his open kitchen, wearing his chef's whites and a topknot, prepping a one-night-only tasting menu of dishes like an "über-BLT" (a deconstructed version made with local tomatoes, corn, and lamb bacon) and "lots of duck," which is exactly what it sounds like. His wife, Isabel Bogadtke, in a gingham floral-print shirt, was handling the wines, which are drawn from a wildly deep cellar and served by the ounce with a Coravin that makes possible pairings like one I had, a 1981 Olga Raffault Chinon Les Picasses with a course of potato raclette. But as good as the food is, the most remarkable thing about FLX Table is its vibe: on trend without being trendy, interesting without being overdone, ambitious without being pretentious. There are just 12 seats, all of them around a farmhouse table, so I ended up sharing the meal with a group of staffers gearing up for the school year at Geneva's Hobart and William Smith Colleges, and a couple from nearby Hornell, New York, out on what, thanks to the seating arrangements, must've started as one of their more peculiar dates. But when the first pours of riesling arrived, and the crudités—a riot of local peppers, squash, beans, and berries—hit the table, we all fell into easy conversation. It's supposed to feel like a dinner party, Bogadtke says. "That's why we have these mismatched chairs. When you go to someone's place, they've always got an odd chair." It was the sort of night you could only have here, where nothing much changes and yet things are getting better all the time. ♦

©
A BARN AT THE
ELDERBERRY
POND FARM.
OPPOSITE:
A SUNFLOWER
FIELD IN
CAMILLUS.





FIGURING OUT THE FINGER LAKES



Making the Trip

The Finger Lakes are four to five hours by car from New York City, depending on where you're going. You can fly any major carrier into Rochester or Syracuse, which bookend the area. There's a small airport in Ithaca, but fares there are often quite high; Skaneateles has an airfield for small private planes.

The Best Home Base

Ithaca, at the south end of Cayuga Lake, has lots of hotels, solid restaurants, and easy access to the top vineyards. Post up at the [Argos Inn](#), in a meticulously restored 19th-century mansion in the heart of the walkable downtown, or spend your nights in a safari-style tent at [Firelight Camps](#), a "glamping" operation that opened near Buttermilk

Falls State Park in 2014. Farther north, the [Inns of Aurora](#) are a collection of renovated historic buildings, many overlooking Cayuga Lake; their newest addition, [Wallcourt Hall](#), occupies a one-time Wells College dormitory. There are countless home rentals in the region listed on sites like Airbnb and HomeAway; Finger Lakes Premier Properties is a local agency with many waterfront options.

What You're Drinking

[Dr. Konstantin Frank](#) and [Hermann J. Wiemer](#) are two of the oldest and best known wineries here, and both make outstanding rieslings and other varieties. Next-gen winemakers like [Bloomer Creek](#), [Boundary Breaks](#), [Heart & Hands](#), [Sheldrake Point](#), and [Ravines](#) have relatively small productions, meaning it can sometimes be hard to source their more esoteric wines outside the region; if you find something

you like, buy a bunch. Empire Estate is a newish label from Thomas Pastuszak; chef Christopher Bates is also making his own wine under the Element label. One of the best places to stock up on Finger Lakes wine (and spirits from local operations like [Myer Farm Distillers](#)) is the Costco-esque [Northside Wine & Spirits](#) in Ithaca.

The Restaurants Worth Hitting

[FLX Table](#) is the region's most inventive restaurant, with not-quite-molecular cooking served at a communal table; reservations are required, but jackets certainly aren't. Its even more casual offshoot, [FLX Wienery](#), is a roadhouse-style joint with house-made brats and sausages, kimchi fries, low-brow beer (Genesee Cream Ale), and high-end wines (this is probably the only hotdog place in New York serving Dom Pérignon). [The Krebs](#) is an old-school classic with up-to-the-minute New American set menus. [Dano's Heuriger on Seneca](#) channels Austria with schnitzel and spaetzle served in a clean-lined modernist dining room overlooking the water. [Le Café Cent-Dix](#) does a perfect frisée-and-lardon salad, as well as fresh oysters and other French-bistro classics. [Sticky Rice](#) feels like a find, hidden at the back of a strip mall, and does fiery curries, Thai *larb*, and Laotian pork salad in a bare-bones room. And you can't get more field-to-fork than at [Elderberry Pond](#), on a 36-acre organic farm between Auburn and Skaneateles.

Getting Outside

The area is filled with state parks, waterfalls, and trails that follow dramatic gorges. Some of the most scenic include [Buttermilk Falls State Park](#), [Taughannock Falls State Park](#), and [Watkins Glen State Park](#); most hikes are a few miles, tops, and only moderately challenging. You can rent boats of all kinds from the [Sailboat Shop](#) in Skaneateles or get a kayak or stand-up paddleboard at [Puddledockers](#) in Ithaca.

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OPPOSITE: THE COURTYARD
AT THE ARGOS INN, ITHACA.
THIS PAGE: CAPPUCCINO AND
DOUGHNUTS AT
SKANEATELES BAKERY.

