

WINE, BEER &amp; COCKTAILS

# Cabernet Franc and the Finger Lakes: Made for Each Other

Wines of The Times

By ERIC ASIMOV NOV. 9, 2017

Over the course of the last decade or so, only one New York State region has been recognized for the world-class wines it has produced.

No, it's not the North Fork of Long Island. That is often the first guess. Perhaps the North Fork's proximity to New York City and the Hamptons is the reason even those with just a tepid interest in wine know about it. Long Island has great potential, certainly, and it has some fine producers. But as a region it has yet to establish an identity for either quality or style.

The region we're looking for is the Finger Lakes of New York in western New York State, where the nearest big cities are Rochester and Syracuse.

This area — with its deep, slender lakes that look as if they were clawed from the earth by a giant prehistoric feline — has defined itself as an unlikely source of superb rieslings. Focusing on riesling was a bold strategy in an era dominated by other white grapes, like chardonnay and sauvignon blanc. It made sense because of the diverse soils and the cool climate, in which riesling can thrive while many other grapes often struggle to ripen.

It is not often in the United States that decisions about which grapes to plant are motivated more by sound viticultural reasons than by commercial concerns. Few marketers looking for a wine to tempt the masses would settle on riesling, a critically adored grape that has had difficulty achieving a clear identity. In Europe, it has become more popular

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For the Finger Lakes, though, it was a sound decision. The critical acclaim for its rieslings has fed a growth in production and the arrival of new producers.

By 2011, the last year for which New York kept records of grape acreage, riesling was by far the region's most planted of white vinifera grapes, the European species that accounts for all the familiar fine-wine grapes. Even so, the region still has many acres of hybrid and native American grapes, like Concord and Niagara, a legacy of its history both as a producer of cheap fortified wines and of small wineries that did the bulk of their business selling directly to visitors.

Still, few regions in the world flourish with only one signature wine. For as long as riesling has prospered in the Finger Lakes, winemakers there have debated what its red counterpart ought to be.

I've had charming pinot noirs, made in a fresh, delicate style rather than with opulent fruit. I've had intriguing teroldegos and blaufränkisches. Yet the most consistently good and distinctive reds I've had from the Finger Lakes have been cabernet francs.

In the last five years or so, I have seen more cabernet francs from the region. It has not been a lot — cab franc acreage accounts for less than a third of riesling acreage — but enough to notice.

As with riesling, focusing on cab franc is not at all a marketing no-brainer. It's the other cabernet, the one without a clear identity and name recognition. The easy path is not necessarily the best path, as was true with riesling, so

maybe cabernet franc, too, makes sense.

Seeking a deeper understanding of Finger Lakes cabernet franc, the wine panel recently tasted 20 bottles primarily from the 2014 and '15 vintages, with one '16 thrown in. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Christy Frank — who, with her husband, owns Copake Wine Works in Columbia County, N.Y. — and Thomas Pastuszak, wine director of the NoMad.

Thomas and his wife, Jessica Brown, also happen to own a small Finger Lakes label, Terrassen Cellars, that makes cabernet franc. Our tasting coordinator, Bernard Kirsch, was unaware of the connection and included a bottle in our blind tasting. To avoid any appearance of a conflict of interest, we did not include it in our rankings.

As we tasted through the 20 bottles, a clear profile of Finger Lakes cabernet franc emerged. These wines were pale in color, savory and spicy, more than sweetly fruity. Indeed, the fruit flavor tended more toward the tart end of the spectrum, leavened with herbal and mineral touches.

These wines spoke plainly of cool-climate viticulture, a phrase often bandied about by regions that have little claim to it. Yet it is a true description of conditions in the Finger Lakes, where alcohol levels only occasionally rise above 13 percent, compared with the 14 percent to 15 percent seen regularly in California. The best cabernet francs were light- to medium-bodied with almost delicate textures and lively acidity, the sort that would go especially well on the Thanksgiving table.

“People are looking for more food-friendly wines,” Thomas said. “Cool-climate cabernet franc will appeal to those seeking mineral-driven, acid-driven, more firmly tannic wines.”

It's certainly a lovely, desirable style, though perhaps not mainstream American yet.

“Up in Copake, a lot of people want something local,” Christy said. “But they also want something that’s big and rich, so it’s a fine line.”

As a sommelier, Thomas has tried to pique his customers’ interest in NoMad’s excellent selection of Finger Lakes wines.

“I used to say, ‘Think of a lighter version of cabernet sauvignon,’” he said. “Now I say, ‘A spicier version of pinot noir.’ It’s been more successful in terms of peoples’ expectations.”

Our top wine, a 2014 from Lakewood Vineyards, epitomized the prevailing Finger Lakes style. The wine was fresh, with an almost crunchy texture and nuanced, savory flavors of flowers, herbs and spicy fruit. By contrast, our No. 2 bottle, a 2015 Le Breton from Schneider & Bieler, was darker and more concentrated than many of the other wines. It nonetheless was well balanced, with the typical tart, herbal flavors.

No. 3 was the 2014 Wisdom from Inspire Moore, a deliciously saline, savory mouthful, with flavors of both tart and sweet fruit. No. 4 was the 2014 North Block Six from Atwater Estate, floral and herbal, with a kind of tense energy to it.

Other wines well worth trying include the savory 2014 Hermann J. Wiemer; the floral, earthy 2015 Damiani; the spicy, refreshing 2016 Hosmer and the delicate but deep 2015 Keuka Lake Vineyards.

Almost any of these bottles is an excellent value. None of our favorites cost more than \$25.

A few cabernet franc-based wines like Bloomer Creek’s excellent White Horse were not included in our tasting because they didn’t meet the 75 percent threshold for using the name of the grape on the label. Perhaps we were being arbitrary, but it was how we narrowed the field.

The focus on riesling and cabernet franc is not to say that the Finger Lakes

do not produce many other fine wines. I've had good chardonnays and gamays. I've enjoyed pinot noirs. And the sommelier Pascaline Lepeltier has recently teamed with Nathan Kendall, of N. Kendall, to make Chèpika, an intriguing pétillant naturel made of the native grapes Catawba and Delaware.

It's the kind of experimentation that suggests a serious exploration of the region's potential. It will only get better from here.

## Tasting Report

Best Value: ★★★ Lakewood Vineyards Finger Lakes Cabernet Franc 2014 \$18

Fresh and crunchy, with savory, nuanced flavors of tart red fruit, flowers and herbs.

★★★ Schneider & Bieler Finger Lakes Cabernet Franc Le Breton 2015 \$21

Concentrated and dark, with well-balanced, lingering flavors of cranberries and herbs.

★★★ Inspire Moore Finger Lakes Cabernet Franc Wisdom 2014 \$19

Textured and saline, with flavors of tart and sweet red fruits and herbs.

★★½ Atwater Estate Finger Lakes Cabernet Franc North Block Six 2014 \$17

Tense and floral, with aromas and flavors of red fruits, herbs and a touch of oak.

★★½ Hermann J. Wiemer Finger Lakes Cabernet Franc 2014 \$25

Savory and tart, with flavors of red fruits and herbs.

★★½ Damiani Finger Lakes Cabernet Franc 2015 \$20

Tart and floral, with flavors of savory, earthy red fruits and a touch of oak.

★★ Hosmer Finger Lakes Cayuga Lake Cabernet Franc 2016 \$20

Spicy and saline, with lip-smacking flavors of red fruits and herbs.

★★ Keuka Lake Vineyards Finger Lakes Cabernet Franc 2015 \$22

Delicate but deep, with savory, lingering flavors of red fruits, flowers and herbs.

★★ Sheldrake Point Finger Lakes Cabernet Franc 2014 \$18

Straightforward, with flavors of cranberries and herbs.

★★ Red Newt Finger Lakes Cabernet Franc 2014 \$19

Juicy, with savory flavors of tart cherries and herbs.

Recipe: **Braised Chicken With Gochujang**

Many of the Finger Lakes cabernet franc wines exhibited restrained fruit, whispers of spice and musky smoke in a brooding package. The wines could handle food with some complexity and heat, so I turned to a slow braise, which infuses meat with deep flavor and produces a warming, stewlike dish. It's the cooking method of choice when the weather brings a chill. The process is what I call the usual three-step affair (brown chicken parts or meat, add other ingredients and some liquid, cover and slowly simmer). But I gave the chicken a bit of heat, unpacking the Korean condiment gochujang with sake, ginger, garlic and some well-mannered poblano chiles. The finished dish would welcome a pillow of steamed rice alongside. **FLORENCE FABRICANT**

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A version of this review appears in print on November 15, 2017, on Page D11 of the New York edition with the headline: Cabernet Franc Adds Its Signature.

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