One of 219 in the world with a master sommelier title, Christopher Bates wanted to make wine, not just share his vast knowledge with people around the globe, so he decided to come home to the Finger Lakes.

Louis Barruol — a vigneron/proprietor of Chateau Saint Cosme in the Rhone Valley of France, whose wine picked up the No. 2 spot on the Wine Spectator Top 100 list of 2012 — wanted a project outside of his country.

And Paul Hobbs, a Buffalo native who has had phenomenal success in California, Argentina and elsewhere, was looking for new geographic adventure as well.

They are but three new entries into a Finger Lakes wine region that is continuing to grow rapidly in volume and stature, says Bonnie Hampton, program manager at the New York Wine & Grape Foundation. In the past three years, the state has added 78 wineries for a total of 363. One-third of the wineries are in the Finger Lakes region, which added 21 new ventures.

The region will celebrate its success this weekend at one of the largest events of the season, the Finger Lakes Wine Festival in Watkins Glen.

While the new ventures are just offering their first wines (or have yet to offer them), they have lofty visions for their wineries' futures, and the future of the Finger Lakes.

Element Winery

Bates won the World Cup of Wine in 2010 and several other sommelier competitions. He graduated from Cornell School of Hotel Administration and has worked in hotels and restaurants internationally.

Yet he wanted to add to his extensive knowledge of vintages, wine regions and service standards — not to mention his expertise in pairing wine and food.

So he sought out hands-on winemaking training. He signed on for the 2004 grape harvest in Italy. Knowing the harvest farther north would come later in the fall, Bates also was able to participate in the 2004 harvest at Immich Batterieberg in Germany's Mosel wine region.

During his stay in Germany, he met and worked with Isabel Bogadtke, whose family has a long history in the hospitality business. She wanted to learn to make wine, too, and they worked that harvest together. They also eventually married.

Bates and Bogadtke decided to come back to the Finger Lakes and the town where he grew up, Arkport near Dansville, to make their wines — wanting to take advantage of the flavors that could be produced from the area's terroir.

Element Winery is now a family operation. It is a joint venture with his father, Robert Bates, who is the owner and day-to-day operator. Christopher Bates fine-tunes the wines during production. Bogadtke helps keep things organized in the winery, sterilizing equipment and helping with wine transfers from barrel to barrel. This fall she will be part of quality control to ensure that only the most healthy fruit is picked and sent to the winery for pressing.

Their first vintage was in 2010, and they have produced Riesling, Pinot noir, Chardonnay, Cabernet Franc and Syrah wines.

Finding faults while making wine is far different from selecting beautiful ones already made and bottled by others.

"When he came home from Europe, he said, 'Let's play with some wine; let's see what we can do,' " says Robert Bates. "And I said, 'Sure'; I had the free time and the resources."

So the experimenting began.

"Here we have everything in place to make great wine. It is important that we embrace the cool climate," says Christopher Bates. "Often growers and owners focus solely on achieving ripeness. Part of making wines in a cool climate is making them taste like it."

To make his wines, Christopher Bates — at least for now — uses grapes from numerous growers in the Finger Lakes region. The operation currently
is a working winery and does not normally offer tastings or tours. However, the wines are available closer to home at Veritas Wine Bar, 217 Alexander St. They also are featured in eight New York City restaurants. And they are available for sale at elementwinery.com (http://elementwinery.com/where/buy-wine/).

From left, Rick Rainey and Justin Boyette are two of the owners of Forge Cellars in Hector. The third owner, Louis Barruol, lives in France.(Photo: JEFF RICHARDS)

Forge Cellars

Rick Rainey of Trumansburg met Barruol, the proprietor of Chateau Saint Cosme in France, during trips to the country for importer and distributor Winebow Inc. On the homefront, he also knew Justin Boyette, a winemaker who had just opened Hector Wine Co. on Seneca Lake with Jason Hazlitt.

"Barruol wanted to do a project outside of France," Rainey says. So in spring 2008, he visited the Finger Lakes and decided that the land, the grapes and the climate were right.

The business opportunity with Boyette also was a plus for Barruol.

The three formed Forge Cellars, which takes advantage of the Hector facility and its equipment to process smaller volumes of wine for Forge Cellars.

"From early on we agreed that we wanted to make Pinot noir and Riesling only," Rainey says. "We have the high-level acidity and minerality and we want to create wine with richness, depth and complexity."

Forge Cellars contracts with growers for grapes, but a bit differently than others. The partners contract by the vineyard acre instead of by the ton. This allows Rainey and Boyette to determine how to treat the crop — including thinning the grapes — depending on conditions during the growing season.

"The intention is to have long-term relationships with growers," who are mainly on the east side of Seneca Lake, Rainey says. The partners love the differences in the grapes even within short proximity.

Boyette and Rainey are in weekly contact with Barruol, frequently Skyping, as they determine how to handle the wine during production. Barruol visits the Hector area a few times a year, and Rainey and Boyette have made some trips to France, as they develop their wine line.

Forge has two labels: The Classic and Les Alliés. The Les Alliés allows the winery to showcase a wine made from a certain vineyard, wines processed in unique barrels or a special blending of wines.

The Forge logo has its own story too. The image of men working at a forge comes from old text from Barruol's family, which also symbolizes the working relationship for winemakers from two continents producing wines in one place.

The 2013 Classic Riesling is about to be released. "The integration is great, a nice blend of fruit and minerality," Boyette says.

Forge Cellars wines can be found and tasted at Hector Wine Company, 5610 State Route 414 on the east side of Seneca Lake. To order wines, go to forgecellars.wordpress.com (http://forgecellars.wordpress.com/purchase-wines/).
Hobbs’ venture

Hobbs, the Buffalo native whose home base is now Sebastopol, California, and his partner in his new Finger Lakes venture, Johannes Selbach of Zeitlingen, Germany, are making progress since announcing early this year their purchase of 65 acres of land on the southeastern slopes of Seneca Lake.

The two wanted an ideal location to start a vineyard in the Finger Lakes. It did not take long to find the rocky soil, on sloped land, near the lake, that they were looking for. The sloped land and proximity to the lake will help buffer the weather in cold years to protect the vineyard. The stony landscape will impact the flavor of the wine. Selbach visited here in June and has already completed a preliminary planting of two acres of grapes.

“We are set up to do 20 acres next year,” Hobbs says. There are plans for additional plantings in 2016 and 2017.

For now, their efforts and finances are being poured into land acquisition and preparation as well as vineyard planting.

"I am hopeful that we can share facilities (for winemaking)," says Hobbs.

They are working with area growers and winery owners to make a second label until their vines are ready to bear fruit.

Brother David Hobbs is involved in day-to-day operations, assisting with the conversion of the vineyard, which includes erosion control and trellising.

“"We need somebody back there to develop attention to detail," said Paul Hobbs, who started his winemaking career with Robert Mondavi, then moved on to Opus One and Simi Winery before starting his own in California. He also is credited with recognizing the potential for winemaking in Argentina.

Selbach, whose ancestors have been raising Rieslings since 1600, runs the highly regarded Selbach-Oster winery with his wife.

Paul Hobbs is looking forward to the Riesling wines that he and Selbach will produce together.

""We have good collaboration. The two of us are in very good contact," he says. "We have so much to learn."

Jeffrey Richards is a freelance writer based in the Southern Tier.

If you go

What: Finger Lakes Wine Festival, with more than 80 wineries participating in tastings, seminars, entertainment and more.

When: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. (Yancey’s Fancy Launch of the Lakes toga party and fireworks is Friday night.)


Cost: $40 for one day and $50 for two days for unlimited tastings.


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