From Long Island to the Finger Lakes and in between, New York produces vibrant, cool-climate reds unlike any others.

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PHOTOS BY CLAIRE ETT

If I proclaimed that the most exciting red wines in the United States come from New York State, would you believe me? On Long Island, classic Bordeaux varieties like Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Cabernet Sauvignon have flourished since their first plantings in the early 1970s. And in the Finger Lakes, where Riesling was long considered the only viable Vitis vinifera variety, Cabernet Franc, Pinot Noir and other reds are gaining momentum.

Exemplifying a sense of balance often elusive elsewhere in the New World, the state’s best red wines marry ripeness and restraint, richness and acidity. They have a distinct, sometimes haunting transparency, says Finger Lakes Winemaker August Diehl of Keuka Springs. “They show everything you do to them,” he says. Unburdened by excessive alcohol or jammy, overripe flavors, they possess a purity of fruit that uniquely expresses New York’s climate, soils and vineyard conditions.
Merlot

Despite talk that can sway consumer preferences, Merlot has maintained its prominence in legendary vineyards around the globe. It’s known for its robust cherry flavors and plum, pencil box nose.

In New York, Merlot is the most grown red variety, with its production centered predominantly on Long Island. It has been planted on the North Fork, where maritime breezes temper summer heat and autumn chill. Allowing grapes a ripen slowly, sometimes well into October, it resembles.

“Merlot is so dynamic in its expression on the North Fork,” says David Page, owner of Chinook Vineyards. “It expresses itself with the most fascinating balance between fruit and earth.”

“Our Merlot is dominated by fruit, but not like you see in the West Coast. It’s more subtle. It doesn’t jam up. It’s elegant and pure, and it’s expressed through this beautiful layer of acidity.”

Fragrant of black cherries and richly savory, Sherwood’s Merlot—while ripe—are nuanced by hints of earth, sap, leather and chocolate. That’s especially evident in the robust 2014 vintage 9 Bullards Reserve (not yet formally reviewed).

Extreme winter weather and sudden temperature dips in the Finger Lakes, however, make Merlot cultivation much more contentious.

“Growing Merlot is a bit of a vanity project for me,” says Shaw Vineyards in Hinckley, about a site from the shore of Lake Geneva. “As far as viable, it’s a commercial grower; it’s a real stretch.”

If it survives the Finger Lakes winter, Merlot retains its potential as a wine, Shaw says. The diversity of clay and shale soils in the Finger Lakes is reminiscent of some of the best vineyards in Bordeaux. “The ones I studied in Bordeaux,” he says, noting that the warmest and dullest nights of a typical Finger Lakes growing season are well suited to the variety.

In the best years, Shaw’s Merlots are subtly perfumed and display a keen balance of ripeness and structure.

“Merlot will hang on to its natural acidity, and it will be balanced by elegant tannin structures, allowing for complex, ageable wines,” he says.

Pinot Noir

Of the grapes rhubarbized about for their seduction surfaces, Pinot Noir has a core of passionate winemakers from the Hudson River to the Niagara Escarpment. The Finger Lakes represent a small Pinot Noir production in New York and has carved an identity of its own.

Citing increasing ripeness levels in contemporary examples of even Burgundian Pinot Noir or German Spätburgunder, Kris Matthewson, owner and co-owner of Bellwether Wine Cellars, suggests that Finger Lakes Pinot Noir has a distinctly cool-climate, high-windo-style.

“It has bright red fruit and delicate aromatics that you can’t find anywhere in the world anymore,” says Matthewson, whose winery is in Trumansburg, a mile away from the west side of Cayuga Lake.

Convention in this distinct expression of American Pinot Noir compelled Rhine Wineemaker Louis Barrell of Château de Saint Cosme to embark on a Finger Lakes partnership with Forge Cellars, with locals Austin Boyette (winemaker) and Richard Rainey (vineyard manager).

“Outside of certain regions in Europe, there really aren’t any other regions making wines with the delicacy and subtlety associated with classic Old World Pinot,” says Boyette. “We’re not trying to copy any style, but we believe we’re making wines that truly represent the place and climate distinct to the Finger Lakes.”

The focus required to produce quality Pinot Noir in New York comes with sacrifices. Winemaker and Finger Lakes native Nathan Kendall is so devoted to the grape that it’s the only red variety he makes under his namesake label.

“It’s my only child,” he says. “Here in the Finger Lakes, we can make a fresh, delicate Pinot with complexity and grace every year.”

Syrah

A variety with the potential to become one of New York’s most acclaimed red varieties in the not too distant future, 2016 Winyu and Forge Cellars in the Finger Lakes already make stellar varieties, while Shaw Vineyards and Harken Family Vineyards have produced compelling bottlings on Long Island’s North Fork.

N. Kendall Wines 2013 Pinot Noir (Finger Lakes). While ethereal in structure, there’s a serendipitously appealing aroma to this light-footed Pinot Noir. Initially pronounced traces of smoke, dried herb and underfired fish into a dusty rose and cherry perfume. Blossom and sage aromas extend into the palate, which leads a revealing fair-to-trick Marionberry-cherry and raspberry flavors. The finish extends on a pleasant note of bitter almond.

SUPERVINO

Documentary of wines brought from the Eastern European country of Georgia by Finger Lakes pioneer Dr. Konstantin Frank in the late 1970s—never released, and delivered Century-old wines. Produced by only a handful of winemakers such as Dr. Konstantin Frank, McGregor and Standing Stone. It’s a thought provoking, remarkably ageworthy wine with robust tannins and acidity.
Cabernet Franc
A touch wilder than Merlot or Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc is the unwieldy yet sexy underdog of red grapes. In France, its herbal, often green, peppery characteristics are embraced throughout the Loire, and it’s heralded as a blending grape in Bordeaux.

In New York, Cabernet Franc exhibits a breadth of styles distinct from anywhere else. Whether aided by New York’s long growing season or challenged by vintage or vineyard conditions, it can be bold, ripe and brooding, or ethereally delicate. Its herbaceous qualities (linked to aromatic compounds called pyrazines) can be expressed in fierce, savage tones of green pepper and grass, or mere whiffs of sage and bramble.

“Frankly, there’s nowhere better in the world to grow it,” says Christopher Bates, MS, winemaker/owner of Element Winery in the Finger Lakes. Cabernet Franc generally expresses itself better in a cooler climate, he says, and, if grown properly, it exhibits a purity of red and black fruit flavors that are balanced neatly with tartness. In his area, he says, it can display “graphite and mineral, and those fine, pretty pyrazines.”

Debra Birmingham, co-owner of Bloomer Creek Vineyard in Hector, on Seneca Lake’s east side, embraces Cabernet Franc for “its wildness; a high-pitched intensity and edge that many people find unexpected and unnerving.”

The Cabernet Franc bottlings at Bloomer Creek embody the diversity in the Finger Lakes. Vin d’été, unfined and unfiltered, is the winery’s designated “summer wine”—sprightly, subtly leafy and sheer, in contrast to its richer, fuller-bodied varietal bottling.

Bloomer Creek also makes a White Horse Blend that combines Cabernet Franc with a smaller proportion of Merlot. The mix tones down the Cabernet Franc’s riotous greenness while maintaining its zesty spice and herbaceousness, says Birmingham.

More beautiful examples of Cabernet Franc can be found throughout Long Island and the Hudson River Valley from McCall, Harbes Family, Paumanok, Macari, Shinn and Channing Daughters on Long Island, as well as Millbrook in the Hudson River Valley.

Lemberger (Blafränkisch)
Regardless of what you call it, there’s not much market recognition for this Central European variety in the U.S. But this uniquely spicy red has the fortitude to thrive in New York’s challenging climates, and the grace to attract new fans. Producers like Hermann J. Wiemer and Red Tail Ridge in the Finger Lakes, and Channing Daughters in Long Island make exemplary examples.