Known as “a place of stone.” Seneca Lake is the largest and deepest of the Finger Lakes. Despite frosty winter temperatures dipping below 30 degrees, it does not freeze. Instead, the 38-mile long, finger-shaped lake retains the sun’s heat - known as thermal retention — nurturing surrounding vegetation, including nearby vineyards.

In late-1970s Seneca Lake wine pioneers like Glenora Cellars and Herman J. Wiemer Vineyard found success on the western slopes, inspiring others to follow. Decades later, the Lake’s western shores is home to dozens of wineries and where I’ve spent much of my time on previous visits.

But this summer, it was the winemaking on the eastern shores that captivated my attention. On a hot, sticky NYC July day, I quaffed a glass of quenching bone-dry Forge Cellars Classique Riesling at Bin 71, a popular wine bar in my upper westside neighborhood. I was blown away by the winemaking chops. It enticed with fresh white peach aromas and pleased with vibrant lime zest, fennel, buoyant minerality and splash of smoke.
I’m a long time fan of Finger Lakes Riesling, but this was different. If tested blind, I would have guessed it was from Alsace, France. Then I learned who the chief winemaker was and it started to make sense.

As I was planning my late-summer Finger Lakes getaway, Forge Cellars was top on my list. When I arrived at Forge’s newly built eco-friendly winery, a big black barn-like structure, on a hilltop overlooking Seneca Lake, I was greeted by assistant winemaker Justin Boyette and managing partner Rick Rainey. Clad in well-worn Blundstone boots and long khaki shorts, Rainey’s wild curly hair matches his exuberant enthusiasm and passion for well-crafted wine.

“We only make Riesling and Pinot Noir,” explained Rainey, who has lived in the area for over 20 years – and worked in the wine biz for just as long. “We love these varietals and feel they have the greatest potential to tell the story of the ‘Lakes.’”

Established in 2009, with their first vintage in 2011, Forge’s wines were initially produced at Hector Wine Company, which Boyette co-owns. Their new 6,5000-square foot energy-efficient facility uses LED lighting with forklifts and hot water heaters powered by propane.

At Forge, new world technology seamlessly melds with old world winemaking. The third partner and lead winemaker is Louis Barruol, renowned 14th generation winemaker of Chateau de Saint Cosme, in Gigondas, France. His family has owned the southern Rhône winery since 1490.

Rainey met Barruol in 2008, in France, during a wine trip, when Rainey was a French wine buyer for an importer/distributor. “Though I don’t speak French,” noted Rainey. “I speak French wine and we got along well immediately;”
Over lunch, Barruol expressed interest in doing his own wine project, outside France. Rainey invited him to the Finger Lakes. Much to Rainey’s surprise, Barruol phoned a few months later, asking when could come. Rainey invited Boyette, a fellow Finger Lakes wine guy, to join them touring local vineyards. At the end of the trip, Barruol announced, “I want to make wine with you in the Finger Lakes.” Forge Cellars was born. Each partner’s last name is scrawled across the bottom of every wine label.

![Forge Cellars bottles](image)

Seneca to “showcase a lot of expressions of Riesling,” said Rainey. “We want to have a dynamic, forward thinking winery that seamlessly flows between the growers to those working in the cellar.”

I followed Rainey past a wall of wine bottles as we strolled through the spacious industrial work area to the cavernous, cool barrel room. Alluring sweet toasted oak filled the cool air and a rush of exhilaration and anticipation washed over me. I love barrel rooms.

There was a boyish excitement as Rainey showed off their new digs and stacks of French oak barrels, crafted by some of France’s best cooperers, such as Tonnellerie Taransaud. Many were once used at Barruol’s Chateau de Saint Cosme.

Some contained the follow-up to the 2015 Pinot Noir Les Alliés I was sipping, which had distinct Burgundian qualities with a new world edge. It enticed with scents of flinty black cherry and delighted with earthy wild strawberries, raspberries, black currant and wisps of granite.

We continued sipping and story swapping on the on the back patio, amidst the fragrant summer flora, overlooking Seneca Lake, until it was time to go.

My next stop was down the road at Standing Stone Vineyards in Hector. I was eager to sample their signature Saperavi wines. Standing Stone was the first American winery to bottle a wine under the name “Saperavi.” This dark skinned, dark flesh grape indigenous to Republic of Georgia, is quite uncommon. With six-acres of the varietal planted, Standing Stone is thought to have the largest planting of Saperavi outside Georgia.