

CLASSIC WINES - PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

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# Riesling Thoroughbreds

from New York's Finger Lakes

By Thomas Pastuszak

Consistent high quality and a never-ending focus on improvement: these principles define the world's classics, whether in art, automobiles, technology or, most certainly, wine. These ideals are how Burgundy came to guide the world of pinot noir and chardonnay, how Napa Valley became the New World's benchmark for cabernet sauvignon, and how the Finger Lakes of New York are firmly planting the flag for riesling greatness in the United States.

Now, a region doesn't achieve world acclaim by virtue of just a few good vines; it needs the support and drive of pioneering producers to help push the region forward and encourage others to come along. The great standard-bearer at the helm of the Finger Lakes revolution has been, and continues to be, Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard.

When Wiemer planted his vineyard nearly 40 years ago, most of the region was planted to native American grape varieties (*vitis labrusca*). The area was deemed by most to be too cold and harsh to be a fine wine region for European wine grapes such as riesling; Charles Fournier at Gold Seal and Dr. Konstantin Frank were two of the rare exceptions who believed in *vitis vinifera* before Wiemer arrived. But Wiemer's cool-climate viticultural experience in Germany led him to plant better vines, in a smarter way, and farm them more sustainably and thoughtfully than most vintners were at the time.

By the early 1980s, Wiemer was producing rieslings that inspired many local naysayers to jump on the bandwagon and begin planting *vinifera* vines. At the time, there was no *vinifera* plant material commercially available in the Finger Lakes, so Wiemer, whose family had been in the vine-grafting business in the Mosel for nearly 100 years, started the Wiemer nursery. Today, the nursery provides the highest-quality grafted grape vines for the Finger Lakes, and sells stock to growers in California and Oregon as well.

Wiemer retired in 2007, handing over the reins to winemaker Fred Merwarth and agronomist Oskar Bynke. They've continued to work to perfect the estate's riesling, paying particular attention in the vineyard. Not only do they continue to push forward Wiemer's sustainable vineyard practices, they've been tweaking details such as the alignment of the vine rows, moving them to optimize airflow



Hermann Wiemer (left) and Fred Merwarth

and sun exposure. When it comes to harvesting, they no longer pick by plot but instead by individual rows, bringing the grapes in over a period of time that can last numerous weeks, to mine the potential of their low-yielding sites.

Merwarth's attention to detail in the vineyards is expressed in the range of single-vineyard wines he's bottled since 2007. Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard was one of the first producers (along with Ravines Wine Cellars and Red Newt Cellars) to put vineyard designations on its rieslings: His 2007 Magdalena Vineyard Riesling was one of the first that opened my eyes to the potential of Finger Lakes riesling. Made with slow, native-yeast fermentations and minimal fining and filtration before bottling, Merwarth's site-specific rieslings are consistently some of the most expressive wines of the region. The HJW Vineyard Riesling (sourced from Wiemer's original vines planted behind the winery building) is a case in point, combining a kaleidoscope of varietal characteristics, ranging from high-toned stone fruit and citrus to dense tropical fruit, and is always backed by bracing acidity, thanks to the particularly cool mesoclimate and thin topsoil of the site.

Inspired by Wiemer wines, an increasing number of producers in the area are now following Merwarth's model in the vineyard. Tom Higgins

at Heart & Hands on Cayuga Lake has been influenced by Wiemer's viticultural practices, and Kim Engel at Bloomer Creek Vineyard, just opposite Wiemer on the east side of Seneca Lake, has been approaching viticulture in a similar manner for nearly as long as Wiemer himself. Both are consistently growing some of the best fruit in the region. Like Merwarth, they are also experimenting with small-lot vinification techniques to fine-tune their winemaking and highlight distinctive lots of wine.

But perhaps more important, after all of these decades, the wines are not just still very good, but continue to become better with each passing vintage. The current-release HJW Vineyard Riesling 2013 is assertively aromatic even at this young age, with tremendous texture and density, fruit concentration and classic riesling acidity—an all-star composite of the best characters of this vintage. And while the 2013 today in bottle is a showstopper, the 2014 tasted from the tank this past spring will be an even greater wine. These and other future successes of the Wiemer estate will be accompanied by many of the other ambitious rising stars of the Finger Lakes who have learned from Wiemer, further solidifying the Empire State's position as the classic riesling thoroughbred of the New World. ■

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