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## Riesling Reimagined

*Fred Merwarth of Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard leads the Finger Lakes' quality revolution*

In 1999, Fred Merwarth knew nothing about wine. A junior at Cornell, he enrolled in a study-abroad program in Freiburg, Germany, near the French and Swiss borders. Merwarth was majoring in agricultural sciences and horticulture so that he could take over his family's Pennsylvania dairy farm, and studying German on the side, for fun.

From Freiburg, he often made the quick trip to Alsace. It was there that he met Christian Beyer, a 14th-generation winemaker at his family's Emile Beyer estate. Beyer took him on a tour of the cellar, sharing samples from casks owned by his family for 300 years. Merwarth was hooked: "We sat, we tasted, and I thought, 'What an amazing life this is.'"

When, after college, Merwarth cold-called Hermann J. Wiemer, a German vintner known for Riesling in the Cornell-adjacent Finger Lakes, he was shocked to hear that Wiemer would take him as an apprentice. That was 2001; Merwarth, now 36, has worked there ever since. With Wiemer, a pioneer in his region, Merwarth has continued to position the winery as the standard-bearer of Finger Lakes Riesling. In 2007, he purchased the brand from his teacher. Merwarth spoke with assistant editor Esther Mobley about the Finger Lakes and the Winery where he is owner, winemaker, and vineyard manager.



Fred Merwarth

**Wine Spectator:** First off, last winter was one of the harshest on record for you. What does the damage look like?

**Fred Merwarth:** It got down to -11°F at the winery this winter. At this point, I don't expect any vine death, which is a tremendous relief. Riesling at all of our three vineyards [has] 25 percent bud mortality. To compensate for damage, we left an extra cane on each plant [when we pruned]. The Pinot Noir and Gewürztraminer—our most cold-sensitive varieties—sustained only 25 percent to 30 percent bud mortality; this is a big surprise. On the other hand, Cabernet Franc, which is typically much harder, sustained more damage.

**WS:** You were first in your area to produce single-vineyard Rieslings. What made you start?

**FM:** Hermann and I were working through lots of ideas. In 2002, once the Magdalena vineyard came into production, we changed the Reserve Riesling into a single-vineyard bottling. We still labeled it Reserve Riesling, but [we] knew that it was 100 percent from this one block. When I tasted the wines from our three vineyards, I [said] "Wow, these are so different!" Hermann said, "Of course, they're different vineyards." Our vineyards are young, but we have worked very hard to get that information, to say, "This block can be a dry spätlese; this is an auslese vineyard."

**WS:** Hermann was also among the first in the Finger Lakes to produce dry Rieslings. Just how dry do you go?

**FM:** That's always an interesting discussion; dry doesn't necessarily mean lack of sugar. Dry is the weight of the wine, the amount of acidity and how the wine finishes. We've never made a bone-dry Riesling. We've always settled on that medium-to-upper limit of what the Germans call dry: 7 to 9 [g/L residual sugar].

We've proved it to ourselves over and over, that an extremely dry form isn't the best representation of our fruit. We always end up blending it back into something that has a little bit of RS.

**WS:** You're known for taking longer than usual with your fermentations?

**FM:** Yes. The 2011 Magdalena stopped the 3rd or 4th of August. That was 10 months. For the first week, I keep the wine very cold, 14°F or so, so it's not going to just roar through fermentation. By the end of October, the cellar's pretty cold. So you have these tanks going into winter, and the yeast organisms don't want to do anything; it's hibernation. Usually by May, sometimes in June, the tanks come alive and go through that last part of fermentation. Sometimes there's 100 grams of sugar, sometimes there's 30. But at that point they always take off. I'm OK with that curve. If the grapes have been selected, sorted and pressed properly, nothing can happen to that tank just sitting there in the dead of winter. You're gaining complexity, mouthfeel, a textural component that wouldn't be there if you only did a 10-day fermentation.

**WS:** What's ahead for the Finger Lakes?

**FM:** There is this great movement now in the Finger Lakes, finally. Small wineries are starting to push quality levels. It's started in the cellar; that progression has to continue into the vineyard. The region has to take some leaps in vineyard management, in yield control, in right sites with the right varieties. There's still hybrids where there should be Riesling, Syrah where there should be Chardonnay. Certainly we have the potential to make fantastic, lean Gewürztraminer, northern Italian-style. With Chardonnay, we're all over the map in terms of style. Some people are all stainless steel, some people are all new French oak. We'll figure it out. A lot of people are intrigued by Pinot; I'm lukewarm about it. Cabernet Franc is a variety that we'll do quite well with; the region has to figure out that yields, regardless of vintage, have to be in line, and you can't go in too early. Once growers make those decisions, and people are willing to pay for it, you'll see some fantastic Cab Francs.

**WS:** What do you like to drink?

**FM:** I love Barolo. I find it fascinating because it is not over-the-top. Nebbiolo is not as powerful as Cabernet and Merlot. When a producer doesn't overwork it, it's a great expression of the place. It maintains austerity for 20, 30 years. I've tasted some old ones and was shocked with how well they hung in there. Just the acidity and the tannins, you're like, "Whoa, these aren't going away!"

I could drink sparklings all day, every day. I had a fantastic crémant last night from Alsace, a rosé that was very, very good. It's a cliché to say Champagne, but I love small-production vintage Champagnes, because there is an inconsistency from vintage to vintage, which I think is little bit more real, I find, than consistent non-vintage bottlings from the big houses. We drink a lot of German Riesling. Not—I hate to say it—not a lot of New World Rieslings. □