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# Wines of the Finger Lakes

## Wines of the Atlantic Seaboard: Part I

Unique Terroir - Riesling, Cabernet Franc & Sparkling - The New Generation - Top Producers & Wines

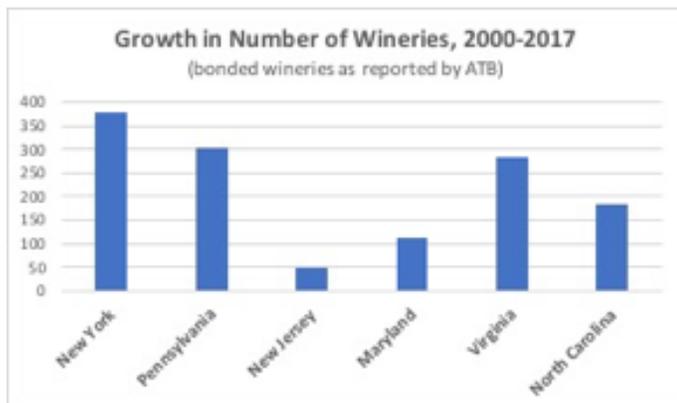
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### Preface: The Transformation of East Coast Wine

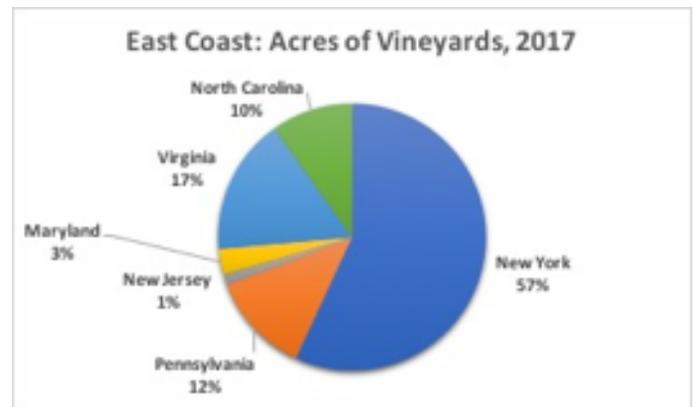
The wines of the Atlantic Seaboard are on the rise. Noteworthy improvements in the quality of East Coast wines and their unique character are attracting growing numbers of wine enthusiasts. Today, more than ever before, consumers along the Atlantic Seaboard are interested in drinking local wines, and liberalized wine laws and regulations make it easier for them to do so. Their thirst for good wine and for learning more about the wines made in their own states is driving a dramatic growth in wine tourism and rising wine sales direct to consumers in tasting rooms and wine clubs.

The East Coast wine industry has also expanded rapidly in recent years. The number of East Coast wineries more than tripled between 2000 and 2017, increasing from 405 to 1720, surpassing the number of wineries in California in the year 2000.



In the light of these developments, the International Wine Review (IWR) is publishing a series of reports in 2019 on the wines of the Atlantic Seaboard. Prepared in collaboration with the Atlantic Seaboard Wines Association and local wine associations, each report in the series focuses on the wineries, winemakers, vineyards, the regulatory framework and future prospects of the industry in each state. The reports also include extensive tasting notes and ratings of the principal wineries in each state. The reports are based on extensive field research, tastings and interviews with local winemakers and industry leaders carried out by the IWR team in 2018.

This is the first in a series of reports on the wines of the East Coast, from North Carolina in the south to New York's Finger Lakes 800 miles to the north. The states included in the series, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina have about 20 thousand acres of vines, and New York has over half the total, as shown in the graph below. These states and the regions within them differ in terms of terroir, wine history, grape varieties grown, and development path of the wine industry. However, they are in many respects more similar than different. In this preface, we examine the similarities. The individual reports that follow explore the unique features of each growing area.



### History

Wine production has a long and colorful history in the East. Up and down the coast, one of the first things European settlers tried to do was grow grapes and make wine. They saw a profusion of wild grapes, from the Muscadines of the south to the Labruscas of the north, giving hope they could grow the European varieties familiar to them. They all failed: Lord Baltimore in Maryland, Thomas Jefferson in Virginia, William Penn in Pennsylvania, etc., and soon began making wine from native grapes (e.g., Concord, Isabella, Scuppernong) and chance hybrids (e.g., Catawba, Niagara). Later on, in response to phylloxera, French agronomists developed large numbers of French-American hybrids, several (e.g., Chambourcin, Seyval Blanc, Vidal Blanc, Vignoles), of which are still widely grown throughout the East, thanks in part to a Baltimore journalist, Philip Wagner, who advocated on their behalf throughout the East. The European grape, *vitis vinifera*, only took root with

the advent of modern fungicides and the development of techniques to prevent winter kill, popularized by Dr. Konstantin Frank in the Finger Lakes in the 1950s.

By the late 19th century, several states had developed large grape and wine industries based on native grapes. One man, Paul Garrett, tied them together, first making Scuppernong wines in North Carolina, then establishing a 4 million gallon winery in Norfolk VA and importing juice from the Finger Lakes to blend with Scuppernong for his famous wine, Virginia Dare. With the rise of Prohibition in the south, Garrett himself eventually moved to the Finger Lakes<sup>1</sup>. After Prohibition, another highly successful, North Carolina vintner, Mack Sands, helped his son Marvin purchase a Finger Lakes bulk wine plant called Canandaigua Industries. Together, they created a high popular, fortified wine called Wild Irish Rose, produced in Petersburg, Virginia, and later purchased the Virginia Dare label. Today, Canandaigua Industries is known as Constellation Brands, still headquartered in the Finger Lakes.

## Legal and Financial Framework

After Prohibition, the states sought to regulate the wine industry by discouraging entry and prohibiting single ownership of all three tiers—production, distribution, and retail. Wineries were thus prohibited from selling wine at the winery and from directly distributing wines to retail stores. Wineries could only sell through distributors, which were often uninterested in selling the products of small producers. Some states, like Pennsylvania, set up a state monopoly to distribute and directly sell wines. With a vested interest in the three tier system, distributors and state monopolies were politically successful in preventing reforms for decades.

Beginning in the 1960s and 70s, states passed Farm Winery Laws to reduce license fees and permit grape growers to sell their own wine at tasting rooms, farm markets, and retail stores. Pennsylvania passed the first such law in 1968, followed by North Carolina (1973), New York (1976), and Virginia (1980). As part of their reforms, most states allowed their wineries to sell direct to consumers, but out of state wineries were prohibited from doing so. In 2005 the US Supreme Court ruled that in state and out of state wineries had to be treated equally. One by one, the states responded by adopting legislation to allow direct shipping from wineries anywhere.

## Viticulture

Over the past decade or more, East Coast wineries have begun to put the focus on the *vitis vinifera* grapes that originate in Europe rather than hybrids and the grapes native to North America. In North Carolina this began with the Biltmore Winery in Asheville planting *vinifera* in the late 1980s. One of the largest grape revolutions took place in New York's Finger Lakes which grew only

native American grapes like Catawba or Niagara until the arrival of Konstantin Frank. However, non *vinifera* varieties continue to play an important role, especially in North Carolina and New York.

Growers are learning where to plant grapes and how to match varieties to terroir. Many of the original vineyards in the East were plantings of convenience. Farmers who could no longer survive off tobacco or dairy cattle planted grapes instead. Or couples looking for a change of lifestyle would build a home and plant a vineyard in a location for its beautiful views. The original plantings were also often to popular varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon better suited to a warmer, drier climate. Today, most new vineyards are being sited only after careful soil analysis and with the advice of viticulture experts, and growers are replanting with varieties better suited to their terroir.

## Winemaking.

There have always been outstanding winemakers in the East like Jim Law and Michael Schapps in Virginia, Hermann J. Weimer and Peter Bell in the Finger Lakes, Dave Collins and Ed Boyce and Sarah O'Herron in Maryland, and Chuck Jones and Mark Friszolowski in North Carolina, and the numbers are growing fast. The region is also beginning to attract young winemakers from all over the world. Jacques van der Vyver of Chateau BuDe in Maryland and Stephen Bernard of Keswick in Virginia hail from South Africa. Matthieu Finot of Virginia's King Family and Morten Hallgren of Ravines in the Finger Lakes come from France; Luca Paschina of Barbourville in Virginia hails from Italy. Other winemakers come from Germany, Portugal, and, of course, California.

The homegrown winemaking talent is also getting better and better thanks to first rate enology and viticulture training offered at universities and community colleges throughout the East. Of particular note is the viticulture and enology program at Cornell University and the degree programs offered at Surry Community College in North Carolina and the Community College of the Finger Lakes in New York.

Even more important, perhaps, is the growing number of agricultural extension agents offering advice on growing grapes and making wine and the viticulture consultants like Lucie Morton and Joyce Rigby and winemaking consultants like Lucien Guillemet and Stéphane Derenoncourt. In addition, winegrowers have formed their own, often informal groups to exchange ideas and taste wines with the goal of learning from experience to improve winemaking. Virginia's recently created Winemakers Research Exchange is an especially noteworthy effort to engage winemakers in practical research to improve grape growing and winemaking.

<sup>1</sup> T. Pinney (2012) *The Makers of American Wine*, UC Press

## Climate and Grapes

The climate of the East is, in general, humid with rainfall throughout the growing season. This puts a premium on grape varieties that have the thick skins and loose clusters that give good disease resistance. Vinifera varieties like Albariño, Petit Manseng, Vermentino, and Viognier show excellent promise among the whites, and Cabernet Franc and Petit Verdot are especially promising among the reds. French hybrids like Chardonel, Chambourcin, Traminette, and Vidal Blanc do especially well and may be the only varieties that can make good wine in a wet year like 2018.

The climate is warming throughout the Atlantic Seaboard as it is everywhere else in the wine world. This presents problems like heavier rainfall and more frequent extreme weather events, but it also extends the growing season. As a result, over time we can expect continued changes in the grape varieties successfully grown as well as changes in where they're grown. Jones von Drehle Vineyards in North Carolina already has vineyards at 1600' in the Yadkin Valley, and others are experimenting with very high altitude vineyards in the Blue Ridge Mountains. In Pennsylvania, Galen Glen is making excellent cool climate whites at their 1000' vineyard. Vineyards that are now marginal in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley may become prime sites in the not too distant future. And one can expect better and better Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc from the Finger Lakes as that region continues to warm.

### Acknowledgements.

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## The Future

All the stars appear to be in alignment for continued improvement in East Coast wine. In another decade we may very well look back and say there has been a "revolution" in the quality of wines coming from the Atlantic Seaboard. What's clear at the present is that each state has some outstanding winemakers making world quality wine. At the same time, most wineries are still producing wines of average quality. Raising the average quality of wine depends on many factors: enlightened public policies and support on the part of the states; continued strengthening of extension services and university-based viticulture and enology programs; new investment to increase the supply of high quality grapes and state of the art winemaking; and more retail distribution of wines to increase their visibility in the market and to strengthen incentives to raise quality and value. As indicated above, we think all of these factors are currently moving in the right direction and promise a very bright future for the wines of the East Coast.

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## Introduction: The Finger Lakes



Located in northern New York east of Lake Erie and south of Lake Ontario, the Finger Lakes wine region is eleven long lakes carved out of the earth by two mile thick glaciers that repeatedly advanced south carving ever deeper river valleys, leaving huge moraines at their southern end. They also repeatedly retreated north, leaving drumlins of glacial debris. When the period of glaciation ended, the rivers became sealed, creating the lakes that provide the conditions for growing wine grapes that are usually found only in warmer climates.

The Finger Lakes has a long history of wine growing beginning in the middle of the 19th century with the arrival of immigrant farmers. They recognized early on that this terroir is uniquely suited for agriculture, especially grapes, and began planting native (*labrusca*) grapes on the hillsides rising above the lake shores. Later, French hybrids and then European *vitis vinifera* vines were added. Large, commercial wineries bought the grapes and made popular, sweet still and sparkling wines, and when they could no longer compete with California abruptly went out of business. This was the crisis that (thanks to New York's 1976 Farm Winery Act) led to growers becoming winemakers and today's burgeoning wine industry of over 130 wineries. It also contributed to the creation of the Finger Lakes AVA in 1982 and the subsequent creation of two sub-AVAs for Cayuga Lake and Seneca Lake.

Today, the Finger Lakes is among the most successful wine regions in the Atlantic Seaboard. Its success has been due to several factors that are discussed in this report. They include the region's long grape growing and winemaking history; the deep, voluminous lakes that create the unique climate needed for making world class wines; and the positive changes which took place in the legal and regulatory framework, as well as the favorable institutional environment which contributed critical technical know-how to the wine industry. These factors have led to an explosion in the number of wineries and an impressive rise in wine quality which is reflected in the winery profiles and the tasting notes and ratings in the final section of this report.

The report concludes by examining the challenges and opportunities for the Finger Lakes wine industry and the

new generation of winemakers and other professionals who will be leading the industry in the years ahead. While there is little doubt that the Finger Lakes wine region has a highly promising future, it will encounter several challenges which are elaborated upon in the report. While much has been written about the Finger Lakes, this brief report, which is based on our field research and extensive wine tastings, aims to provide an updated assessment of this outstanding wine region and its wines.

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