

# **The 2023 Harvest Report**

By Erin Scherer

Once in a while, you get a season in the Finger Lakes like 2012 or 2020, where it seems like the stars align and growing conditions are nearly perfect. More often, however, there's a weather event that throws a wrench in everything and makes farming a challenge. For example, in 2018, the season was shaping up to be great, but heavy rains and high humidity in late summer resulted in increased disease pressure which in turn stalled sugar accumulation at harvest. Following the 2021 harvest, daytime temperatures in the Finger Lakes region hovered around 40 or 50 degrees well into December. Consequently, vines did not go into full dormancy before a few nights of extreme cold in January of 2022. That extreme cold air settling around active vines resulted in high bud mortality throughout the region.

At the start of 2023 the Finger Lakes grape growers had the beginnings of what looked to be high yields with early bud break and shoot growth in response to unseasonably warm temperatures during April. Sadly, on May 18<sup>th</sup> that all changed overnight with the late frost event that caused significant fruit loss throughout the region. Many farmers were out in the middle of the night doing what they could to stave off the damage. While this freeze may have only lasted for a few hours, it lasted long enough to do serious damage to shoots in many parts of the Finger Lakes. As if the freeze event were not enough, the early growing season was plagued by intense smoke cover from the Canadian wildfires, only to be followed by overcast and rainy days throughout the summer months. By September, conditions improved with long stretches of dry, sunny weather.

For Tina Hazlitt of Sawmill Creek Vineyards, recent vintages reflect an ongoing trend influenced by climate change: "The 2023 frost was no different than the deep winter freeze of 2022 followed by a summer drought, or the devastating flash floods of 2018. Climate change overall has made what we do for a living very precarious to keep our heads above water financially."

The spring freeze damage at Sawmill Creek varied between hybrid and vinifera grapes: hybrids appeared to suffer less than their vinifera counterparts. At Sawmill Creek's Tichenor Road vineyard, hybrids suffered a 50% loss while the vinifera had nearly an 80% loss. In addition to the freeze damage, Sawmill Creek found the 2023 summer challenging for other reasons. Says Tina Hazlitt: "Grapevines don't like 'wet feet'. So, where we had clogged, failed tile lines, excess water sat for extended periods

and reduced the vigor, resulting in weaker and less productive vines in those areas.” For Hazlitt’s Sawmill Creek Vineyard, the fruit loss associated with the freeze combined with the challenges of the wet growing season led to decreased sales overall.

For Lahoma Vineyards, on Seneca Lake’s southwest shore and purchased by winemaker Kelby Russell earlier this year, the combination of early emergence and a late frost also resulted in decreased sales. “We cut down significantly on what we were able to supply to wineries who have been buying fruit from Lahoma for 10-plus years,” says Russell, “And for several new, small wineries that we were hoping to get fruit to as they start up, we were unable to help.” During the rainy and overcast growing season, Lahoma Vineyards fared better than some, but Russell also realizes he’s one of the lucky ones. “What we would normally think of as a recipe for higher disease pressure was largely kept in check by attentive work and spray schedules in the vineyard, and I think the fact that there were enough stretches of dry days for things to correct amidst all the rain.”

At Shale Creek Vineyard on Keuka Lake, Colleen Hardy, co-owner of Living Roots Winery (and daughter of the vineyard’s owners) shared initial estimates of fruit loss were around 30%. At this site the hybrids also survived the freeze better than the vinifera: the hybrid grape Elvira was the most unscathed, while Pinot Noir and Pinot Meunier fared much, much worse. One potential byproduct of the subsequent heavy rainfalls was larger berries. However, Hardy didn’t see any significant changes, “With the reduced yields and good slopes for tiling and drainage, we had a fairly average berry size at Shale Creek.”

Following the spring freeze, some vineyards had only minimal fruit losses. For example, Tom Higgins of Heart and Hands Winery estimated only a 2-5% loss in fruit. Their location, further north on the east shore of Cayuga Lake fits with the overall geographic pattern of freeze damage. Vineyards to the north were spared in comparison to those further south in the Finger Lakes. For Heart and Hands, the damp summer was a bigger hassle: “The moisture and humidity during the growing season posed some challenges,” recalls Higgins. “We had to adjust the fungicide levels windows. While botrytis wasn’t a concern, downy mildew pressure kept our sprayer busy.” Reports from other vineyards at the northern end of the lakes (e.g., Three Brothers Winery and Zugibe Vineyards) were similar – the freeze was not a significant event for them, but the rainy growing season kept them busy.

When thinking about the comparison between vinifera and hybrid varieties for the big freeze event, Traminette and its parent grape Gewurztraminer come to mind. Interestingly, New York State

Department of Agriculture and Markets declared Gewurztraminer yields to be so reduced that wineries were allowed to purchase this grape from out of state. Traminette harvests were also reduced but not to the same extent. From Adam Folts managing 180 acres of vineyards on Keuka Lake, “Crop estimates were challenging. You could look at the row on one side of the tractor and see typical fruit abundance while the other side had no fruit at all.” Nancy Tisch, winemaker at Bet the Farm Winery, ordered extra Traminette in 2023 because they did not get any in 2022. “With 3 tons coming from Folts and another 400 gallons of settled juice from Fulkerson, we were worried about tank space. In the end, however, we only received about 300 gallons in total.”

Although the Cornell publication *From Version to Harvest* reported low sugar levels, that wasn't necessarily the case with those interviewed. “We were seeing reduced sugars and higher acids early on during the beginning of harvest season, but mostly everything caught up, and we were seeing excellent sugars, especially with our vinifera reds,” says Hazlitt. Higgins and Hardy reported no significant changes in sugar levels, and that was largely true for Russell at Lahoma as well, with one notable exception: “Sugar levels were low in some varieties—I'm looking at you, Riesling—but fantastic in others, such as Cabernet Franc. And in the instance of Rieslings, the sugars are still more than acceptable, and that is before we discuss the great flavors of old school—dare I say classic? —Finger Lakes acidity.”

August had a streak of very hot days, but by September, things had evened out in time for harvest. Russell reports some grape sunburn at Lahoma, but otherwise, “it was a spectacular month”; Hazlitt describes September as a “big help” and the varieties that had been lagging caught up to where they should be. For Hardy, September provided her vines “with some nice windows of weather for sugars and flavors to progress, and to keep the fruit relatively clean. Adds Higgins: “The warm, dry September and October was a welcome gift. It provided the perfect conditions for a smooth harvest and winegrowers in the region toasted to Mother Nature's cooperation.”

Overall, 2023 may have been a daunting vintage, but many winegrowers remain optimistic. Says Russell: “The general feeling in the region from vineyard managers and winemakers I have spoken with is incredible optimism regarding the quality of 2023. The remarkably cool and dry October really brought this vintage from good to potentially great.”

Release dates for 2023 wines could start in early 2024 for roses and whites and much later in the year and even into 2025 for reds. Time will tell how the vintage will be remembered.