

2024 Harvest Report

“...as close to a perfect vintage as we can hope for in the Finger Lakes...”

Ian Barry, winemaker Buttonwood Grove Winery

By Phil Carstens

If you listen closely, you can hear celebrations erupting at vineyards all over the Finger Lakes wine country. Granted, this is an annual tradition as a collective sigh of relief marks the culmination of another chaotic growing season, but this year is decidedly different. This year, the cheers are less about triumph over adversity and more about joyful gratitude for a nearly perfect growing season. The excitement for this vintage is palpable and it's a welcome change for a region that has struggled with harsh growing conditions in recent years and the low yields that came with them.

A trip down memory lane must first take a stop in 2023 when a mild winter and warm spring days promoted a bud break about two weeks ahead of schedule. Growers were cautiously optimistic about the implications of this head start on shoot growth and overall yield, but then the worst case scenario materialized. On May 18th, a deep late-season frost occurred overnight, bringing record low temperatures to some locations that lasted up to six hours. While some vineyards managed to escape relatively unscathed, others suffered 100% loss as a result.

The previous year, in 2022, saw a different set of challenges. A generally mild winter left the dormant vines unprepared for the few extremely cold days in January and February, reaching temperatures as low as -18°F, which resulted in some hard freeze damage. The already stunted vines (and exhausted from being fully cropped in 2021) were then presented with a dry late spring and hot and dry summer, leading to great wines, but below average growth and yield.

Fast forward to this year and the story is quite different. While the winter was, once again, mild with little snowfall and a warm early spring jump-started the growing season with early bud break, the night temperatures stayed above the dangerous levels seen in the 2023 deep frost event. The stage was set for vigorous growth and continuing ideal conditions ensured that the growing season moved full steam ahead. Mixed weather patterns in the summer included warmer-than-average days interspersed with rainfall that supported steady vine development, while the fall weather sealed the season as one to remember. September brought near-perfect conditions, with warm days and cool nights accelerating ripening for many grape varieties and a mostly dry October allowed for longer hang times to push ripeness as far as possible.

On the east shore of Seneca Lake, **Boundary Breaks co-owner Bruce Murray** echoes this sentiment. “Generally, it has been a very good season, following several challenging ones. In 2024, we have had a combination of warm weather and just the right amount of rain when we needed it. Late June through early August were very warm which is an ideal period for fruit

development. Our grapes ripening seems to be one-two weeks earlier than normal. But that also means that if we can keep the grapes out longer, they will be riper, and late-ripening varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon might turn out to produce great wines in 2024. We are all very pleased with this year's fruit, which is not something we can always say."

Further west, on the west shore of Keuka Lake, **Dr. Konstantine Frank Winery** experienced similarly favorable results. When asked to share her perspective on the harvest season, **Meaghan Frank**, the granddaughter of Konstantin who oversees day-to-day operations of the vineyard, was unequivocal in her response: "Our 2024 harvest was one for the record books. It was fast and furious with an early start in the first week of September for our sparkling wines. Cornell Cooperative Extension estimated we were about 2 weeks ahead of a normal year. We also had less disease pressure due to dry sunny conditions through most of September and October. This was a very rare year in which quantity and quality were both high. We needed this win after 2 back-to-back small harvests."

In the daunting pursuit of defining a growing season, it is often helpful, and even necessary, to balance anecdotal perspectives with objective scientific analysis. Growing Degree Days (GDD) measures heat accumulation during a growing season, which is critical for understanding grapevine development and ripening. In the last issue of *Veraison to Harvest 2024*, **Hans Walter-Peterson, of the Cornell Extension Finger Lakes Grape Program**, illuminated how special this season has been from a data-driven perspective: "We can certainly say that 2024 was warmer and wetter than average overall, and an early season with regard to vine and fruit development. Our average GDD accumulation for a season (April 1 – October 31) is 2503, but this year we hit that number of GDDs on September 13 – about 6 weeks early." These warm days combined with a dry harvest season created higher-than-average Brix levels and faster acid declines, resulting in many varieties reaching balanced levels for their respective wine styles.

The direct beneficiaries of such balanced fruity perfection are, of course, the winemakers—the wizards of the vineyard, often tasked with alchemizing weather-battered grapes into vintages that will be appreciated by the most discerning palates. While some years require wines to be fixed in the cellar, others present winemakers with juice that is naturally poised for enological success. **Ian Barry, a winemaker at Buttonwood Grove Winery**, made it clear which category he believes this year falls into. "I think it's safe to say at this point that 2024 has been as close to a perfect vintage as we can hope for in the Finger Lakes. A summer filled with intermittent rain and sun set the vines up for success and a warm, dry fall sealed the deal. We had the rare opportunity to watch the brix go up steadily while flavors developed and acids slowly degraded. Ripe tannins formed in the seeds and the threat of rot was fairly minimal. I don't think this is the 'new normal' in the Finger Lakes, but we should be appreciative when Mother Nature throws us a bone."

When asked if there were any specific grapes that he was excited about, **Wes Andrew, head winemaker at Atwater Vineyards**, located on the southeastern shore of Seneca Lake, could barely contain his enthusiasm for this year's varieties. "I think this year is going to be

good for everything! I'm particularly excited for the Dry Reisling this year. You don't always get a really ripe Riesling and we've got some nice, clean, ripe fruit. It's not often that you see a 22 ½ Brix Reisling that also has nice acid numbers so I'm hoping that'll be a big standout." An added benefit to having nearly perfect conditions in 2024 is the re-emergence of rarer varieties that can only be produced when everything is just right. Alongside the usual stars of the region like Reisling and Cabernet-Franc, Andrew is hopeful that more finicky reds commonly used for blends will be able to stand on their own as a 2024 vintage. "I haven't pressed it yet, but it's looking like a Cab Sauv year. We don't always leave it on its own nor do we the Syrah because, for those two, the standard is high and if they're not good enough, then we don't make them."

Smaller vineyards like **Frontenac Point**, on Cayuga Lake's west shore, are also excited about a bottle-worthy vintage. "Good wine starts in the vineyard with quality grapes," explains co-founder and co-owner, **Jim Doolittle**. "So that limits the grapes that can be used to make Frontenac Point wine. In exceptionally rainy summers we choose to not harvest any of our grapes. That means no wine is made in that year. So a 'perfect' growing season means a good harvest and vintage wines are made at Frontenac Point." Needless to say, the Doolittles harvested their grapes in 2024.

While the consensus for the 2024 growing season has been overwhelmingly positive, it was not without its difficulties. A narrow miss of an early freeze in October reminded the Finger Lakes region how quickly its luck can change, while a neighboring region suffered an all-too-familiar fate. In late April, a severe frost event struck the Lake Erie grape production region, heavily damaging vineyards, especially those growing Concord grapes. During the freeze on April 24-25, temperatures fell below freezing across numerous locations, impacting roughly 70% of the 16,000 acres of Concord grapes in the most affected areas of Chautauqua and Cattaraugus Counties.

Climate change continues to play a major role in the industry and growers in New York, including the Finger Lakes, are actively adapting to climate challenges through innovation, collaboration, and the adoption of new practices. While longer, warmer growing seasons allow for more vigorous growth, fuller ripening, and a wider range of potentially successful grape varieties, they make the region more susceptible to pest pressure, disease, and unpredictable, extreme weather events. Use of innovative tools like laser deterrents for bird management, bioinoculants for disease prevention and soil health, and animal grazing for sustainable vineyard management and diversified revenue streams will be a necessity for business resilience in a rapidly changing environment.

But Finger Lakes wine growers are a hardy bunch and facing adversity in a cool-climate wine region is par for the course. Next season will bring its own challenges, but now is the time to get back to celebrating. The vineyards are hilled up, wines are resting in their barrels, and winemakers and enthusiasts alike will have their patience tested as this year's legendary vintage slowly but surely develops its full potential. **Brooke Hosmer, General Manager of Hosmer Winery**, perfectly captured this sentiment with a closing thought:

“We are ecstatic about this year's vintage. Some of the best fruit we've seen: incredibly clean, fairly large berry size, and exceptional ripeness. We're already looking forward to drinking this vintage... but we'll have to wait!”

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