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Finger Lakes Named American Wine Region of the Year

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Carol, Lawrence and Jim Doolittle, owners of Frontenac Point Vineyard & Estate Winery in Trumansburg, are one of many local vineyards and wineries that have contributed to the Finger Lakes being named American Wine Region of the Year.

Photo: provided

This October, the Wine Enthusiast, a global media company regarded for its expertise on all things wine, named the Finger Lakes American Wine Region of the Year. Through decades of growth, the region now has more than 140 wineries and over 10,000 acres of vineyard.

In Tompkins County, vineyards and wineries such as Six Mile Creek Vineyard, Frontenac Point Vineyard & Estate Winery, Bet the Farm Winery and others, produce quality local wine and contribute to the area's tourism economy.

Amy Navor, executive director of Finger Lakes Wine Alliance, said this recognition is a reflection of decades of investment, innovation and determined vision.

"We're thrilled that this award honors the farmers, winemakers, and families who bet on this region long before the world was watching," she said. "It's not about one label or vintage, it's about a region that's come of age with authenticity and purpose."

While the Enthusiast speaks on the beauty of the Finger Lakes and the quality of its wine production, it highlights the resilience needed for vineyards to thrive in New York's climate.

Navor said the region's grapes are nurtured through a "slow, balanced ripening" made possible by the conditions near the 11 lakes. Along with sparkling wine, Navor said the region is best known for its Riesling, Chardonnay, Cabernet Franc, and expressive heirloom varieties.

The region's cold conditions are an obstacle for vineyards and climate change has brought more irregularity in weather as well as earlier grape harvests. Carol Doolittle, co-owner of Frontenac Point Vineyard & Estate Winery in Trumansburg, said that Frontenac Point is growing more hybrid varieties than when they first started in 1978 because they can adapt better to changing conditions.

Yet, hybrid grapes are what wineries like Frontenac create their distinctive flavors from. Among other varieties, Frontenac has hybrid vines with a cross of *Vitis vinifera* grape and North American *Vitis labrusca*.

"Growing more 'hybrid' varieties is important since they accommodate changes in weather, such as more or no rain, and are resistant to disease," Doolittle said. "In our experience some prized *Vinifera* varieties of grapes are less accommodating to such weather changes and require more 'input' to survive and produce quality grapes."

A turning point for Finger Lakes wine production can be traced back to the 1950s, when Konstantin Frank introduced *Vitis vinifera* grapes, which Navor said propelled the region into a new era.

“It transformed the course of winemaking in the region,” Navor said. “Decades of innovation, sustainability, and quality-driven craftsmanship have followed, and today our Riesling, Cabernet Franc, and sparkling wines stand among the most respected in the country and define who we are on the global stage.”

Another historic moment for the Finger Lakes was the passing of New York’s Farm Winery Act of 1976. At that time, Carol and her husband Jim Doolittle — now owners of Frontenac Point with their son — both worked in the state Department of Agriculture and Markets and Jim assisted in writing the legislation.

Carol said that legislation is one reason there are so many small-scale production farm wineries in the Finger Lakes. The new law allowed wineries to sell their wine directly to consumers and retailers at market price. Before, wineries could only sell 5% of their wine directly, with the rest going to wholesalers for half price. The law also reduced the annual license fee for farm wineries from \$625 to \$125.

Carol said Frontenac Point continues to be involved in state legislation impacting wineries.

“When we worked in Albany we saw that people on the outside make a difference, but only if they connect with decision makers at the legislative as well as agency level,” she said. “I hope that more younger winery owners will get involved now.”

From legislation to the ideal grape varieties, for decades, local vineyards and wineries have sowed the ground that made it possible for the Finger Lakes to become the American Wine Region of the Year.

“We are delighted that this respected, international publication is calling positive attention to the wineries and quality of wines produced in the Finger Lakes,” Carol said in an email statement. “Our son, Lawrence, is taking over our winery/vineyard, thankfully! The second generation of many enterprises usually make changes. Since some Finger Lakes wineries are moving into the second - or more - generation, the future of the wine community in the Finger Lakes looks really good.”

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