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**[Californians can now buy New York wines directly from the wineries. The state's unique climate makes it worth doing.](#)**

- Dave McIntyre, Special to The Chronicle  
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**Watkins Glen, N.Y.** -- When Scott Osborn gazes down the slopes from his vineyards toward the gleaming waters of Seneca Lake, the horizon may seem broader than in the past.

"We're all lusting after new markets," says Osborn, owner of Fox Run Vineyards in New York's Finger Lakes region. His remark sums up the excitement shared by many Empire State vintners over a new law legalizing direct-to-consumer shipment of wine into or out of New York.

Over the past three decades, a growing number of vintners in the Finger Lakes, Long Island and to a lesser extent the Hudson River region have been quietly changing the definition of New York wine. To be sure, there are still tanker loads of jug wines and grape juice produced from native varieties such as Concord and Cayuga throughout the state. But these three areas in particular have focused on the classic European vinifera grapes -- such as Riesling and Merlot -- and have established thriving wine regions with high-quality products.

Until this year, however, their success was a neighborhood secret, even though New York is the country's third-largest wine producing state after California and Washington. New York wineries sold \$420 million in wine in 2004, with an annual impact of \$3.3 billion on the Empire State, according to St. Helena-based MKF Research.

New York law allowed "farm wineries" to sell wine at their own tasting rooms and to ship it directly to consumers within the state. Direct shipment across state lines in either direction was prohibited, though many wineries shipped anyway until authorities cracked down.

Now, thanks to the U.S. Supreme Court, it's legal.

"Freedom at last!" exults Roman Roth, winemaker at Wolffer Estate Vineyard in the Hamptons on Long Island's South Fork. The winery saw an immediate blip in sales when the law took effect last month, Roth says.

At Channing Daughters Winery nearby, winemaker James Christopher Tracy -- a San Francisco native -- sorts through the various state permits he needs to obtain before expanding his mailing list to out-of-state customers.

"Direct shipping is very important to us, for we sell most of our wine by mail to a list of

more than 900 people, all in-state," he says. "We have a file folder of a couple hundred people who've been asking to join our wine club, but we haven't been able to accommodate them until now."

In the Hudson River region about 80 miles north of New York City, Millbrook Vineyards & Winery is celebrating its 25th harvest this year, and hopes to expand out-of-state sales. The winery, part of the group that includes Healdsburg's Williams Selyem Winery, produces stylish Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Cabernet Franc and Tocai Friulano, a white Italian varietal. Millbrook used to sell as many as 2,000 cases a year by mail until authorities began enforcing the ban more than a decade ago, and now hopes to recapture that market, says David H. Bova, the winery's vice president and general manager.

Small wineries like Millbrook from little-known wine regions like Hudson River had difficulty attracting the attention of distributors, so very few New York wines made their way out of state except in the car trunks or suitcases of tourists.

In May the U.S. Supreme Court declared New York's law unconstitutional, and the state legislature wrote new legislation allowing direct-to-consumer shipments into and out of New York.

There are skeptics who doubt that consumers across the country will be willing to pay a \$36 premium to have a case of New York wine shipped to their doorstep. Others predict the flow of wine into New York from California or even Washington will exceed the amount of wine leaving the state.

Yet the new law presents a golden opportunity for New York's smaller wineries, says Jim Trezise, president of the New York Wine & Grape Foundation. "Going the wholesale route doesn't make sense economically," he says.

Trezise, who lobbied for years before the Supreme Court decision to have New York's law changed, even staged the foundation's annual wine competition in 2003 at Copia in Napa in order to showcase New York wines to California judges.

He predicts, "Within six months or so a number of wineries will be doing quite well through direct sales."

10 times bigger than 1974

New York's wine industry has expanded from 20 wineries in 1974 to 219 today. Tourism has been a major factor. Trezise's foundation reported this month that Empire State vintners welcomed more than 4.1 million visitors in 2003, a 54 percent increase over 2000.

"A large portion of our customers visiting the wineries during the summer are from out of state," says Fox Run's Osborn, echoing comments from many vintners.

California may be the market that excites these vintners most. Many grew up in California or honed their winemaking skills there. They realize Californians may know little of New York's wine industry, except that Constellation Brands of Canandaigua, N.Y., now owns much of California's wine business. Like a traveling theater company finally able to perform on Broadway, New Yorkers are eager to strut the boards before the hometown crowd.

Finger Lakes vintners compare their region to Germany's Mosel, noting the steep slopes leading down to cool lakes, scratched out of the earth long ago by retreating glaciers. The slopes create a moderate microclimate that protects vines against late-spring frosts.

Winters can be harsh, however. The winters of 2003 and 2004 were brutal with prolonged periods of below-zero temperatures, in one case immediately after a warm spell that teased the vines awake. Pinot Noir, championed by some as the best red varietal in the Finger Lakes, was especially hard hit. Production of all vinifera wine was down significantly in both vintages.

### Pioneers of Riesling

The Finger Lakes region was planted primarily to native and hybrid varieties until the 1960s and 1970s, when vinifera pioneers Konstantin Frank and Hermann J. Wiemer proved that Riesling, especially, can thrive in the region's cool climate. Today, Dr. Konstantin Frank Vinifera Wine Cellars and Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard still produce some of the region's best wines, including dry and semi-dry Rieslings, Alsatian-style Gewurztraminer and elegant sparkling wines. They have been joined in the top echelon by wineries that include Fox Run, Lamoreaux Landing Wine Cellars, Red Newt Cellars, Chateau Lafayette Reneau and Heron Hill Winery.

A Finger Lakes Riesling can be either a light, easy quaff or a complex and age-worthy wine. The best examples combine "lime, minerals, hints of tree and tropical fruits and the perfect amount of acidity," says Peter Bell, winemaker at Fox Run. They have more alcohol -- typically 12 to 12.5 percent -- and body than most Mosel wines, which usually come in at 10 percent alcohol or less, he says.

They can also be hard to come by. Riesling has gained in popularity, and many wineries sell out of a vintage while the next is still on the vine. With the low yields from the winter-ravaged vintages of 2003 and 2004, many Finger Lakes wineries may find themselves without wine to sell to initial customers from out-of-state.

One St. Helena-based vintner, Scott Harvey, ordered a case of 2004 Anthony Road Finger Lakes Riesling soon after direct shipping became legal.

Harvey, who was born in Germany and studied winemaking there, said the case arrived "with no problems, except I've drunk it all. I'll keep a regular supply coming. The wines are very good."

In fact, Harvey liked the wine so much that he subsequently ordered two tons of Riesling grapes from this year's crop. He plans to have the grapes shipped in refrigerated containers to Napa, where it will be crushed and fermented. He says he's planning to release it in March 2006 under a new label, Jana, named after his wife. Harvey says he plans to charge about \$22 for the wine, which he may have to give an "American" AVA.

Ironically, Anthony Road charges \$11.99 a bottle for its Riesling, though shipping to California costs \$20 more for one to six bottles.

### More than just Riesling

The Finger Lakes has more than Riesling to offer. Chardonnay boasts more acidity and less oak than the typical California counterpart. Gewurztraminer fans will relish the Alsatian-styled examples here, while lovers of dessert wines will enjoy late-harvest and ice wines from Riesling and hybrid grapes such as Vignoles and Vidal Blanc. Cabernet Franc, which ripens early, does well among red wines, typically in a soft, juicy style, though Pinot Noir has its champions.

One winery that does not expect to do much direct shipping is Dr. Frank's, which has succeeded in gaining distribution in 28 states and Washington, D.C. Dr. Frank's wines

represented New York on the wine list at Copia when that facility opened and now have modest distribution in California.

"We support the traditional system, including the distributors we've worked with for years," says Fred Frank, grandson of Konstantin. "Why would somebody order over the phone or the Internet and pay an extra \$30 or \$40 for shipping a case, when it costs mere pennies a bottle to ship a palette? The value is in the traditional distribution system."

That said, the winery will ship to California.

The Long Island wine route

Route 25 on Long Island's North Fork from Riverhead to Greenport somewhat resembles Napa Valley's Highway 29, with its procession of wineries and small towns. A total of 38 wineries and 3,000 acres make up Long Island's three AVAs -- the North Fork, the Hamptons and Long Island.

The moderate maritime climate, warmed by the Gulf Stream, invites comparisons to Bordeaux, although the Bordelaise may not have to deal with the occasional hurricane at harvest time. Merlot is the star red grape here because it ripens early in the area's late growing season, while the more leisurely Cabernet Sauvignon can fall prey to autumn rains. Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc shine among white varieties.

Stylistically, Long Island wines match their geography -- halfway between California and France. They are unabashedly American in fruit and European in style. Harvest for red grapes is typically in late October and early November, with sugar levels coaxed slowly higher by the warm days and cool nights of Indian summer, giving them ripeness and acidity without excessive alcohol.

"When California is beginning harvest in August, we're just experiencing veraison," says Barbara Shinn, owner of Shinn Estate Vineyards on the North Fork, referring to the stage when the grapes change color and begin to ripen. Shinn and her husband, David Page, met while working in restaurants in Berkeley in the 1980s. Page is chef and owner of Home restaurant in Manhattan, which features an all-East Coast wine list.

They use sustainable vineyard practices -- without herbicides -- to produce crisp Sauvignon Blanc and intensely flavored Merlot.

Hang time -- leaving the grapes on the vine as long as possible to achieve maximum ripeness -- is not the issue in Long Island that it is in California. Long Island vintners worry more about sufficient ripeness, with sugar levels creeping upward in late October, long after California's wines have fermented in the cellar.

"We can't go over 14 (percent alcohol)," because the grapes won't ripen to that extent, says Eric Fry, winemaker for 18 years at Lenz Winery.

Although Fry says he learned his craft "at the University of Mondavi," having started in 1976 as a microbiologist at Robert Mondavi Winery in Oakville, his Merlot aims less at Napa Valley than at Pomerol, the area of Bordeaux where Merlot shines in Chateau Petrus and other wines.

"We can't make a California-style wine," he says. "This is who we are. Take it or leave it."

If Long Island's wines differ stylistically from California's, its wine industry has some parallels to the Golden State. Hollywood's wine-loving glitterati vacation in the Hamptons.

Michael Lynne, co-chairman and co-CEO of New Line Cinema, helped inaugurate a new, well-funded stage in Long Island winemaking in the late 1990s when he purchased Bedell Cellars, one of the North Fork's first and foremost wineries.

As California has Randall Grahm at Bonny Doon, Long Island has its own varietal renegade in Tracy, at Channing Daughters Winery on the South Fork. Tracy, whose parents owned a vineyard in St. Helena when he was young, goes beyond conventional varietals in favor of grapes such as Blaufrankisch (Lemberger) and Dornfelder. His 6,000-case production is spread over 26 bottlings, including a stellar Sauvignon Blanc, Tocai Friulano and a Muscat-based blend called Sylvanus.

And then there's Roth of Wolffer Estate, also in the Hamptons on the South Fork. Born in Rottweil, Germany, Roth produces a full line of wines from \$10 up to New York's most expensive, a small-production Merlot he calls "Premier Cru" that, at \$125, is clearly a jab at California's cult wines. His bravado at pushing the price envelope has earned Roth a measure of celebrity -- his name is whispered with awe at Long Island wine tastings -- as well as some good-natured derision.

Like his fellow winemakers, Roth is eager for the new law to broaden his markets beyond the seasonal crush of tourists.

"The day will come when we sell more wine over the Internet than in the tasting room in winter," he predicts.

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Start spreading the news

Here are some of New York state's best currently available wines. Listings are alphabetical by winery, with the winery's retail price.

2004 Atwater Estate Vineyards Finger Lakes Riesling (\$15) -- Bright lime zest, mineral and pear flavors. Delicious, light and versatile with foods.

2001 Bedell Cellars North Fork of Long Island Reserve Merlot (\$30) -- Elegant Bordeaux-styled Merlot, with a smoky, coffee nose and mineral, woody plum flavors over a long finish. Good value for the quality. Also good: Cupola, a Bordeaux blend.

2004 Dr. Konstantin Frank Finger Lakes Dry Riesling (\$18) -- Dominated by peach and apricot flavors, flecked with lime zest and stone. Medium weight and finish. Also good: Rkatsiteli, Gewurztraminer, sparkling wines (Chateau Frank), Salmon Run Johannisberg Riesling.

1999 Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard Finger Lakes Cuvée Brut (\$23) -- The Empire State's best and most consistent bubbly, made from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in the traditional method; crisp, refreshing, toasty and complex. Also good: Riesling and Gewurztraminer still wines.

2000 Lenz Winery North Fork of Long Island Old Vines Merlot (\$55) -- Beefy, mineral nose with sour cherry flavors, full mouthfeel and a long, sweet, complex finish with soft tannins. Also good: Estate Selection Merlot, Gewurztraminer.

2001 Martha Clara North Fork of Long Island 6025 (\$40) -- From the Entenmann family of bakery fame comes a winery to watch. This red Bordeaux blend comes close to a California style, with its sweet-ripe fruit flavors and, at 13.6 percent, relatively high alcohol for Long Island, giving it exceptional body. Also good: Sauvignon Blanc, Gewurztraminer, Merlot, Syrah and Himmel late-harvest Riesling.

2004 McGregor Vineyard Finger Lakes Semi-Dry Riesling (\$20) -- Crisp lime and pear, with good mineral backbone and nice acid-sugar balance.

2003 Millbrook Winery Hudson River Region Proprietor's Special Reserve Chardonnay (\$18) -- Rich, elegant and stylish, with stone fruit and spicy wood notes giving the wine backbone and complexity. Also good: Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc, especially estate-grown wines.

2003 Pellegrini Vineyards North Fork of Long Island Chardonnay (\$14) -- An astonishing value from a consistently top-notch winery. Burgundian in style with stone fruit, spice and oak lingering over a long finish. Also good: "Encore" Bordeaux blend, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon.

2003 Ravines Wine Cellars Finger Lakes Riesling (\$15) -- Apples, pears and stones, cleansed by rainwater. Also good: Chardonnay, "House White" (Cayuga-Vignoles blend).

2002 Shinn Estate Vineyards North Fork of Long Island 6 Barrels Reserve Merlot (\$35) -- Intense cherry compote and cake spice, with a sweet, oaky finish. Also good: Sauvignon Blanc-Semillon.

2002 Wolffer The Hamptons Reserve Merlot (\$20) -- Bordeaux-style, with pencil shavings and mineral on the nose and cherry/plum fruit, Good value. Also good: Premier Cru Merlot, Reserve Chardonnay.

-- Dave McIntyre

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#### How to buy New York wines

Connect to most of New York's finest wineries through the Web sites of the New York Wine & Grape Foundation ([newyorkwines.org](http://newyorkwines.org)) and the Long Island Wine Council ([liwines.com](http://liwines.com)). Winery Web sites typically feature information on which wines are available and how to order them.

Shipping costs vary by winery, but figure on adding about \$3 per bottle, or \$36 per case. This covers the cost of shipping and protective packaging to shield your wine from extreme temperatures and breakage.

-- D.M.

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