

# High on Hybrids

NEW YORK'S **SENECA LAKE AVA** IS MAKING A CASE FOR HERITAGE GRAPES by Allison Levine

**MOST OF THE WINES** we enjoy, from Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc to Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, and everything in between, are varieties of *Vitis vinifera*, the European grapevine. But there are also hybrid grapes, which are the result of crossing *Vitis vinifera* with its American relative *Vitis labrusca*. Hybrid grapes were first cultivated in response to phylloxera, and while they're resilient when it comes to insects and diseases as well as impervious to rot, mildew, and low temperatures, they have not been embraced by many winemakers—except, that is, in cold regions such as Seneca Lake, the largest and deepest of New York's 11 Finger Lakes.

Located within the Finger Lakes AVA, which was established in 1982, the Seneca Lake AVA was created in 2003. Its producers are leading an effort to shift the narrative as they push for greater recognition of and respect for hybrid grapes—which they're collectively referring to as "heritage" or "heirloom" varieties—and the wines they yield.

The following five hybrid varieties offer high levels of natural acidity, making them ideal for use in sparkling and dessert wines as well as in still wines.

## CAYUGA WHITE

One of the most popular hybrid grapes grown in the Finger Lakes, Cayuga White was developed by Cornell University in the 1970s and produces crisp, fruity white wines such as the Lakewood 2021 Bubbly Candeo, a sparkling wine with 2.2 grams per liter (g/L) of residual sugar and 7 grams of total acidity that cleanse the palate.

## TRAMINETTE

Created in Seneca Lake and introduced in 1996, Traminette is a cross of Gewürztraminer and a French-American hybrid, Joannes Seyve 23.416. Fox Run winemaker Craig Hosbach describes it as a vast

improvement over Gewürztraminer, offering a more complete wine with a vibrant finish and no oiliness. The Fox Run 2021 Traminette, with 2 g/L of residual sugar, has floral, herbal, and lime-skin aromas as well as tart acidity and a touch of sweetness on the finish.



## VIGNOLES

Yielding a medium-bodied, crisp, and flavorful wine, Vignoles is a French-American hybrid of another hybrid grape, Seibel 6905 (also known as Le Subereux), and a clone of Pinot Noir, Pinot de Corton, that was developed in France and brought to the U.S. in 1949 before arriving in Seneca Lake in the 1970s.

Atwater, a family-owned winery on the eastern side of Seneca Lake, ages its Vignoles for seven months in stainless steel. Featuring notes of pineapple, peach, and nectarine, the 2020 vintage has 6.5 g/L of residual sugar, but the sweetness is not cloying due to the intense acidity.

Anthony Road Wine Company makes four styles of Vignoles, including a Late Harvest Vignoles comprising at least 50% botrytis-affected grapes. The 2020 vintage, made in a Beerenauslese style with 12.65 g/L of residual sugar, has aromas of crushed apricot and a lovely, juicy finish.

## DECHAUNAC

DeChaunac is a dark-skinned French-American hybrid of the Seibel 5163

Harvest in New York's Seneca Lake AVA, which was established in 2003.

and Seibel 793 varieties that ripens early. Winemaker J.R. Dill often uses DeChaunac in blends at his namesake winery, but the J.R. Dill 2018 DeChaunac is a single-varietal expression that aged for two years in French oak and offers notes of tart cherry and fresh earth with good acidity.

## VIDAL BLANC

Vidal Blanc is a white hybrid variety produced from *Vitis vinifera* Ugni Blanc and another hybrid variety, Rayon d'Or (Seibel 4986). Vidal is known principally for its use in icewine, including the Wagner Vidal Blanc Ice Wine, whose sweet notes of honey, pear, orange blossom, and citrus are balanced by acidity.

These hybrid grapes have allowed growers to produce quality wines in regions that were previously considered too cold and challenging for traditional varieties. And given their reliability in the face of changing climatic conditions—including frosts, heat waves, and hailstorms—perhaps even regions exclusively employing *Vitis vinifera* should take a deeper look at hybrid varieties. ■

