

Water and wine are the blessings of New York's Finger Lakes region



Taughannock Falls has a 215-foot-high waterfall — 30 feet taller than Niagara Falls. (New Saetiew / Getty Images)

By **Margo Pfeiff**

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“Turn right at the suit of armor and your chamber is at the top of the stairs,” the check-in clerk said. “And this is the key to the wine spigot.”

Behind a small wrought-iron grill on a second-floor wall of [Belhurst Castle](#), a free-flowing spigot delivers the estate’s red wine to guests overnighting in the grand, turreted 1888 mansion overlooking Seneca Lake.

Upstate New York’s [Finger Lakes region](#) is an old-world, unhurried and unpretentious oasis of nature, culture, cuisine and world-class wine.

You'll visit formal Victorian gardens, museums and galleries, bicycle through 19th century villages, sip chilled wines in lakeside tasting rooms and hike to dozens of waterfalls.

During a five-day visit this summer, the only traffic jam I encountered was behind a horse-drawn Amish carriage making a left turn into a Burger King.

Autumn is one of the most popular times to visit this beautiful, affordable wine-growing region. Vineyards are tinted saffron and maroon, and hillside foliage explodes in rich red and gold, outlining 11 glacier-carved lakes spread side by side like the fingers of a splayed hand, stretching from Syracuse in the east to Rochester in the west.

After a 40-minute drive from Rochester, N.Y., I arrived in lakefront Canandaigua. I had a great introduction to all things New York at the [New York Wine & Culinary Center](#), a nonprofit showcase of the state's foods, wines and brews.

There are hands-on cooking and wine classes, a gourmet boutique, tasting rooms and the Upstairs Bistro, where I enjoyed lunch ordered from a menu listing ingredients sourced from 40 local farmers and producers paired with wines from Long Island to the Finger Lakes.

Nearby is [Sonnenberg Gardens & Mansion State Historic Park](#), a lavish Queen Anne-style summer estate from 1885 surrounded by a spectacular 50 acres of formal gardens.

A short drive away in Newark, I checked into the [Vintage Gardens B&B](#), an elegant Tudor inn run by a California couple from Chico.

I headed off on my rental bike (delivered to the inn) and pedaled two blocks to hook up with the pathway following the Erie Canal, which opened in 1825.

These days, it's a popular kayak and canoe route and a scenic waterway for self-skippered European-style canal boats.

That evening in Geneva, a small city graced with Greek Revival and Italianate homes at the northern tip of Seneca Lake, I settled into the chic [Microclimate Wine Bar](#) tucked away on historic downtown Linden Street.

Knowledgeable co-owner Stephanie Mira de Orduna served me a flight of five Rieslings from around the world, including one from the Finger Lakes.

"This region's many lakes, with their different slopes, create a microclimate that is more diverse — and I

think better — than the Niagara region, which only has one lake,” she said.

The Finger Lakes’ signature wine is Riesling, a classic European grape producing sweet and dry wines, plus excellent ice wine.

The deep, cool lakes moderate the often extreme summer and winter weather, creating an ideal climate for cool-climate grapes such as Gewürztraminer, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc, among others grown, by the 120 wineries that flank their shores.

The network of lakes also makes this region ideal for following three wine trails — and a cheese trail — in crisp, sunny fall weather.

I puttered down Seneca Lake’s western side, stopping for tastings at [Billsboro](#), [Fox Run](#) and [Red Tail Ridge](#) wineries, and my car trunk began to fill.

You also can hire a private car or a limousine, or a designated driver to chauffeur your vehicle. Wine tastings can even be done in a sleek mahogany runabout or other small boats on Cayuga Lake.

The distillery, cider and craft beer movements also have boomed in the Finger Lakes region in the last five years. I took a break from wine and ordered a Mysterium Brun at [Climbing Bines Hop Farm & Brewery](#), where a rock band was jamming in its pavilion to the delight of dancing kids and their parents, sipping in the sunshine.

In late afternoon, just outside the charming town of Watkins Glen at the base of Seneca Lake, I hiked in [Watkins Glen State Park](#) on trails that wound past 200-foot cliffs fueling 19 waterfalls. The route took me over and under cascades and through their spray.

By 10 a.m. the next day, I was soaring with Sean Murphy in a motorless glider towed by a powered plane before being released to soar in silence.

From my glass bubble behind Murphy, I gazed down at forests, farms and villages around the town of Elmira, the Soaring Capital of America.

Afterward, my heart still racing, I toured the [National Soaring Museum](#) with its collection of beautiful, sleek flying craft dating to 1890.

I drove northward along Seneca Lake, backtracking up the eastern shore, and stopped for lunch at [Red Newt Cellars](#), producers of internationally acclaimed Rieslings.

A Red Newt visit was a pilgrimage for me; its Circle Riesling was my first Finger Lakes wine and persuaded me to visit this region. The casual lunchtime bistro overlooking the lake celebrates the region's best farmers with delicious comfort food.

I headed eastward toward Cayuga Lake, passed more wineries and a goat dairy and stopped for homemade ice cream before heading to [Taughannock Falls State Park](#) for its 215-foot-high waterfall — 30 feet taller than Niagara Falls. It's one of the Northeast's tallest falls, plummeting through a rock amphitheater whose walls are nearly 400 feet high.

But Ithaca, at the foot of Cayuga Lake, is the epicenter of waterfalls; it has more than 150 within 10 square miles. Small wonder that local T-shirts brag "Ithaca is GORGES!"

The waterfalls flow across town and funnel through gorges carved by glaciers. Whether you're prowling [Cornell University](#), downtown's Ithaca Commons or one of the state parks, you can't help but stumble on a waterfall.

Ithaca is a laid-back, funky university town. [Ithaca Commons](#), its downtown square, has recently had a major makeover that's created a wide pedestrian way with galleries, artisan shops, eclectic independent record and book stores, farm-to-table eateries and a farmers market.

I followed [Sagan Planet Walk](#), a walkable scale model of the solar system winding through the city and named after Cornell astronomy professor Carl Sagan.

In homage to the late Sagan, artist Leo Villareal created "Cosmos," a spectacular public art installation on the ceiling of the sculpture court at Cornell's [Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art](#).

Using 12,000 energy-efficient LEDs on a gridded framework attached to the ceiling, swirling images of galaxies and creative light dance over your head and are best seen at night from the zero gravity bench below.

The art museum itself is a spectacular contemporary building designed by Chinese American architect [I.M. Pei](#) and houses wonderful exhibits. The bonus: a 360-degree view of surrounding lake country from the top floor.

I climbed the 161 steps up McGraw Tower and reached the top just in time for the Cornell Chimes concert when the tower's 21 bells are played primarily by student chimes masters several times daily, the university's oldest musical tradition.

Ithaca has dozens of excellent eateries, and I chose an institution, the vegetarian [Moosewood Cafe](#), whose cookbooks were culinary bibles that got me through the 1970s. That's when I lived with a vegetarian, and there was precious little in the way of creative guidance when steaks and chicken were off the menu.

After a day of Ithaca culture, it was a rare pleasure to return to [Jupiter Hill B&B](#) in the nearby village of Trumansburg, where I had the inn's gallery of fine American Impressionist paintings from the early 20th century all to myself.

I savored them slowly, sipping a chilled glass of Finger Lakes Riesling, of course.

THE BEST WAY TO THE FINGER LAKES

From LAX, Southwest offers direct service (stop, no change of planes) to Rochester, N.Y., and Delta, American, Southwest, United and JetBlue offer connecting service (change of planes). Restricted round-trip fares from \$429, including taxes and fees. The Finger Lakes region is about 40 minutes east of Rochester.

WHERE TO STAY

Vintage Gardens Bed & Breakfast, 310 High St., Newark, N.Y.; (877) 331-6045, www.vintagegardensbedandbreakfast.com. Elegant 1844 historic Tudor manor on 2.5 acres of formal gardens two blocks from the Erie Canal. Fall specials from \$115.

Belhurst Castle, 4069 W. Lake Road, Geneva, N.Y.; (315) 781-0201, www.belhurst.com. Once a private 1888 castle on the shores of Lake Seneca, Belhurst is on the National Register of Historic Places and offers accommodations in three buildings. Spa, restaurant and winery on the grounds. Double rooms from \$185.

Juniper Hill B&B: 16 Elm St., Trumansburg, N.Y.; (607) 387-3044 or (888) 809-3167, juniperhillbnb.com. An exquisite five-room luxury B&B and veritable gallery of fine American Impressionist paintings from the early 20th century. Doubles from \$209, including gourmet breakfast.

WHERE TO EAT

Upstairs Bistro at New York Wine & Culinary Center, 800 S. Main St., Canandaigua, N.Y.; (585) 394-7070 www.nywcc.com. Taste all of New York in one location on Canandaigua Lake, a one-of-a-kind, nonprofit restaurant with classes, a gourmet boutique and tasting rooms. Lunch for two from \$50.

Microclimate Wine Bar, 38 Linden St., Geneva, N.Y.; (315) 787-0077. Unique chance to taste test flights of wines from around the world, including the Finger Lakes, grouped by varietal. Also serves microbrew beers, small plates of local cheeses, meats and breads.

Moosewood, 215 N. Cayuga St., Ithaca, N.Y.; (607) 273-9610. Iconic vegetarian/vegan restaurant whose cookbooks are renowned. Dinner for two from \$60.

Red Newt Cellars Winery & Bistro, 3675 Tichenor Road, Hector, N.Y.; (607) 546-4100. Cozy bistro overlooking Seneca Lake featuring fresh regional Finger Lakes produce. Now offers boxed lunches to go (call ahead to order). Lunch for two from \$35.

WHAT TO DO

Water to Wine Tours, (607) 229-6368. Five-hour lunch and wine-tasting small boat tours around Cayuga Lake. Also happy hour and dinner cruises. Departs from several locations. From \$89 per person, not including lunch or dinner.

Sonnenberg Gardens & Mansion State Historic Park, 151 Charlotte St., Canandaigua, N.Y.; (585) 394-4922

Harris Hill Soaring & National Soaring Museum, 51 Soaring Hill Road, Elmira, N.Y.; (607) 734-3128. The museum is home to the world's largest sailplane collection. To take a ride in a glider, go to www.harrishillsoaring.org or call (607) 734-0641. The gliderport is across from the museum at 57 Soaring Hill Drive. \$96 per person for a 15- to 20-minute flight.

Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, 114 Central Ave., Ithaca, N.Y.; (607) 255-6464. Free admission. Book in advance for excellent tours.

TO LEARN MORE

New York State Tourism

Finger Lakes Wine Country

Finger Lakes Tourism

Cayuga Wine Trail

Seneca Wine Trail

Erie Canalway Bike Routes

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