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## **ROOSTER HILL WINEMAKER TOOK WORLD WINE TOUR**

With a wealth of wine experience beyond her years, Paige Vinson is off to a fast start as the winemaker at Rooster Hill Vineyards on Keuka Lake.

Vinson, 28, took herself on a globetrotting journey of learning while working at far-flung wineries for much of the past three years. Now, with this year's grape harvest about a month away, Vinson is excited about the prospect of turning Finger Lakes grapes into Rooster Hill wines.

Her winemaking work has already won accolades. Under her direction, Rooster Hill won eight medals at the recent New York Wine & Food Classic, including a Gold Medal for the winery's new Sparkling Cider.

"I am more excited than nervous about this harvest," Vinson said. The upcoming harvest/winemaking cycle will be the first she will guide from start to finish, and she is looking forward to it with a mixture of "pure excitement and terror." She became Rooster Hill's winemaker in December 2015.

Vinson, who lives in Geneva, grew up in Honeoye and graduated from Alfred University in 2010 with a Bachelor of Arts in Fine Arts and Philosophy. She has worked at wineries around the world, in part to see how other regions compared to the Finger Lakes, the place she wanted to work.

"I knew the Finger Lakes was a popular region and I wanted to be part of that," she said. "The Finger Lakes is an open, welcoming place — so much positive feedback, so much willingness to help" among those in the region's wine community.

Energetic and eager to keep learning, here is the trail that Vinson followed to become a winemaker at 28:

After graduating from Alfred, she worked at her father's company, where duties included driving a diesel truck and training employees. She decided she wanted a more process-oriented career. Just as a sculptor creates a piece of art from clay, — a winemaker creates wine from grapes. "I do consider winemaking an art and a science," she said.

She looked into graduate-degree programs around the nation and came upon one in viticulture and enology at nearby Finger Lakes Community College in Hopewell, Ontario County. "I joined the program and didn't look back," she said, noting that she was also attracted to the Finger Lakes food scene.

While going to FLCC, Vinson also worked at the Geneva location of Ravine's Wine Cellars and at the New York Wine & Culinary Center, in Canandaigua. She received an associate's degree in Viticulture and Wine Technology from FLCC in 2014.

Next, she lined up a harvest job at Domaine Serene winery in Oregon's Willamette Valley and drove across the United States to work there on the 2014 harvest with an international group of seasonal employees.

Then she flew to Australia, where she worked 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. shifts during the harvest season at the Domaine Chandon winery in the Victoria region. This was quickly followed by stints at Greystone Winery and Muddy Water Wines in Waipara, New Zealand. During the 2015 harvest, Vinson was at Red Newt Cellars Winery & Bistro in Hector, where she worked with Winemaker Kelby Russell.

While on her world wine tour, Vinson said, she learned wine vocabulary from vineyard to cellar, acquired a collection of techniques and styles of making wine and met many people who expanded her wine education.

Her winemaking philosophy: "I like to give myself as many pieces of the puzzle as possible to work with. There's no one right way to do it. I feel like I am learning something every day."

Vinson credits Fox Run Vineyards Winemaker Peter Bell with spreading the word about her availability when she was ready to return to the Finger Lakes, and Paul Brock of FLCC with letting her know about the Rooster Hill position, which opened up last year when Winemaker Barry Tortolon left Rooster Hill to become winemaker at Heron Hill Winery.

As evidence of the Finger Lakes wine industry's welcoming nature, Vinson already belongs to a "tasting group" that also includes Bell, Tortolon, Russell and a few other local winemakers.

Vinson expects the upcoming grape harvest's quantities to be down because of the drought, but of high quality. It "stands to be a good year" for grapes such as Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc, she said. "You can't do anything without great fruit."

What are her favorite wines? It's an eclectic list. "I love Riesling. I'm a sucker for Pino Noir, but Cabernet Franc would be close, too. I like to try new things."

Her latest new thing is winemaker at one of the Finger Lakes most honored wineries. The opportunity came faster than she expected, but Vinson is proving herself up to the challenge day by day.