

# TRAVEL

WINE FLIGHT

## The Hills Are Alive Meet the makers at the forefront of Vermont's fermentation revolution.

By Alice Feiring

*Vermont's Otter Creek flows into Lake Champlain between Middlebury in the south and Burlington in the north, making for a picturesque stop on a summer road trip.*

PHOTOGRAPHY: CALEB KENNA

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Vasilios Gletsos at his Wunderkammer brewery; Burlington's Hotel Vermont (home to regular pizza nights) makes a good base from which to explore the region; a selection of meads made with local honey from Golden Rule Mead.

**A**FTER A TWISTY 40-MINUTE CAR RIDE down rambling lanes and dirt roads, I scoured the leaf-strewn landscape for what brewer Vasilios Gletsos had described in a text to me as “a mound of earth.” Somewhere, embedded in that green watercolor expanse, was a brewery. Finally, there it was: a hobbit hole hidden under the brush. Gletsos waved me through the door, his beers lined up waiting. His purpose, he soon told me, was to “explore the earth,” doing so through fermenting forageable ingredients—with delicious results. As I sipped on one of his chiseled Wunderkammer beers, its taste sharpened with mintlike fall pine tips, I eyed another bottle, this one brewed with rhubarb. These fresh new tastes are emblematic of a movement taking hold in the Green Mountain State.

My love for Vermont goes way back, to the quality of its country dancing (I’m an old folkie) and to its fierce, idealistic people. Recently, another magnetic force has drawn me there: artisans like Gletsos, who work to express their vision of place in a roiling vortex of all things fermentable. There’s been such a dense concentration of fermentation in this state that I created an itinerary simply so that I could discover its most exciting proponents. Splitting my base between the urban Burlington and the more rural Stowe put me never more than one hour from a visit, which meant plenty of time for tasting and catching up with new brewers and winemakers at every stop.

The roots of Vermont’s fermentation fame began with winemaker Deirdre Heekin of La Garagista, when she started







Kathline Chery (LEFT), Grace Meyer (MIDDLE), and Justine Belle Lambright (RIGHT) are the trio behind Kalchē Wine Cooperative, which champions equity and sustainability in winemaking.

fermenting grapes she'd planted and fruit she'd foraged up around the hilltop house she and her husband share outside of Woodstock. Since 2011, when I started tracking her work, Heekin's wines—using little-known grapes like Brianna, La Crescent, and Marquette—have emerged as standard-bearers of delicious, snappy, crunchy fun. In her rustic barn, she co-blends and co-ferments different fruits and was certainly the first to declare that this would be Vermont's claim to fame. Now, two of her prime mentees, Willa Deeley and Camila Carrillo, are further blurring the boundary between cider and wine. They scavenge for anything at all to ferment or co-ferment—plums, pears, rose hips, table grapes, and more—Deely under the label Disciple and Carrillo under La Montañuela. (Both are sold on La Garagista's website, [lagaragista.com](http://lagaragista.com).)

One of the newest crafters of co-ferments to appear on the scene is Kalchē Wine Cooperative, a collective winery where blending wine, cider, and beer is the norm. I drove through the mountain pass from Stowe to find the three fresh-faced pioneers who moved to Vermont to make a fermentational difference. Grace Meyer, Kathline Chery, and Justine Belle Lambright want their winery to be a model workers' cooperative that they can replicate nationwide. Winemaker Chery and manager Belle Lambright toured me around. When we came upon their landlord's cranberry bog, Chery recalled the group's delight when

the light bulb first went off for them. "We looked at each other and knew what we had to do: cran-apple cider." Of course!

Not too long after, I had an epiphany of my own, when I stopped in to visit Alexandre Apfel in Middlebury. Originally from Colorado, Apfel, too, wanted to add something to the fermentation conversation in Vermont. And he likes bees. So he set up Golden Rule Mead in the basement of his home, using the living room as a homespun tasting room. As I parked and got out, I shuddered lightly, remembering my first experience with mead, involving a very cute London zookeeper, his homemade brew, and a hammering hangover. I never thought I'd be eager to taste the stuff again. But the soft-spoken Apfel is changing a lot of people's notions about the quality of honey wine. When he told me that a tasting of a flight of six different meads was \$5, I responded, "You have to charge more!"

His response was gentle but firm. "No."

Only in Vermont.

He packages his meads in adorable apothecary-like bottles and steeps teas in the brew, which adds textural tannin to the product. That must be why his delicious red wine-like Black Cap reminded me of Marquette or even Gamay.

"I don't want to get locked into rules of tradition," Apfel explained. He's doing a great job breaking them—I found myself enjoying mead for the first time in 30 years, and all because he





had felt the world didn't really need yet another brewery. But try telling that to the people of Grand Isle, who finally have one of their own.

Grand Isle, sunk in the middle of Lake Champlain between mainland New York and Vermont, is a short drive from Burlington via a 1.5-mile-long bridge that runs between the town of Milton and the island. The last time I'd driven through, the island had been wall-to-wall Bible camps. Now, another kind of local fervor has taken root. Between the biodynamic Ellison Estate Vineyard (and its mostly fizzy wines) and Kraemer & Kin's brewery, there are plenty of reasons to visit this magical place.

Levi Kraemer and his sister Heather met me at the tasting room they share with an art gallery, an open, spacious place that was once a church. They source many of the ingredients from their family's farm or what they can find in the surrounding nature. They're committed to creating beers that are "island-based," incorporating pumpkin that comes from their farm in fall, lilac from their home in the spring, and fresh hops (mostly) from their own hop yard.

Clutching a few cans of that brisk, fresh-hopped beer, I drove back to Burlington. The sky seemed to bleed right into serene Lake Champlain. I pulled off to the side of the road to take the stillness in and to reflect. I was in awe of these fresh enthusiasts who were keeping their noses to the ground and their hands in the stars, each with their own way to give the land a voice.

*Alice Feiring's new book, To Fall in Love, Drink This, will be out this August from Scribner.*



*FROM TOP: The cozy dining room at Burlington's Honey Road restaurant; Ellison Estate Vineyard on Grand Isle is a colorful summer destination for vibrant natural wines; the same island also sports a new brewery, Kraemer & Kin.*





## WHERE TO STAY

### HOTEL VERMONT

This is *the* Burlington perch, right in the middle of downtown. The hotel is packed with industrial-meets-homespun design (think stone and wood meets flannel-blanket sensibility), and the lively bar scene caps it off with plenty of homegrown wines and beers to drink. (Rooms from \$375, [hotelvt.com](http://hotelvt.com))

### TÅLTA LODGE BLUEBIRD

This newly opened retro-fitted motel just outside of Stowe sports a vintage-y 1950s Danish modern vibe, complete with pool, firepits, and sylvan surroundings. (Rooms from \$236, [bluebirdhotels.com](http://bluebirdhotels.com))

## WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

### CORK

The menu might seem a bit overwrought (Honey Nut Cheerios foam?), but flavors at this place are full throttle. The wine list is nifty, with a cool bottle shop next door that includes natural wines of all stripes, including from Vermont. ([corkvt.com](http://corkvt.com))

### HONEY ROAD

A vibrant Eastern Mediterranean menu invigorates this beloved woman-owned spot, which has a varied wine list and local beers. The food is powered by the likes of sumac and Svanetian salt, and don't miss their pide. Reserve way ahead. ([honeyroadrestaurant.com](http://honeyroadrestaurant.com))



FROM TOP: La Garagista Farm and Winery is home to fun seasonal pop-ups and wine tastings; the lounge at Tålta Lodge Bluebird, a renovated motel on the outskirts of Stowe; elegant small plates accompany an eclectic list of natural wines at Cork.

## WHERE TO TASTE

### ELLISON ESTATE VINEYARD, GRAND ISLE

Sip (or buy) their fizzy and still wines, watch the sheep stroll through the vines, and take in that magnificent lake view. ([ellisonestatevineyard.com](http://ellisonestatevineyard.com))

### LA GARAGISTA FARM AND WINERY, MOUNT HUNGER

While it doesn't have formal hours in the tasting room, the winery hosts Tavernetta Forestiera, a fun seasonal pop-up where you can buy wine and meet a cross section of vibrant humanity. Check online for dates or join the mailing list. ([lagaragista.com](http://lagaragista.com))

### KRAEMER & KIN, NORTH HERO

Sharing space with an art gallery in an old, austere church is this impressive new brewery. Check out the crisp wild hops or intense honey beer. (Open Friday through Sunday, [kraemerandkin.com](http://kraemerandkin.com))

### ARBOR FARM MARKET, SOUTH HERO

This farm store is owned by a farmer who practices "veganic" (vegan-organic) farming, so you know the local produce here is going to be a knockout. But so are the Grand Isle knitted sweaters and local wines and beers. Worth a detour! (Open Wednesday through Sunday, [arborfarmmarket.com](http://arborfarmmarket.com))

### CANDY LAB, SOUTH HERO

Stop by for handmade chocolates, Latin American street food, and delicacies like homemade corn ice cream. (Open Monday through Sunday, [champlainlandscandylab.com](http://champlainlandscandylab.com))

### GOLDEN RULE MEAD, MIDDLEBURY

A rustic tasting room in the brewer's village home and on his porch is a great place to get your mead on. (Open Friday through Monday, [goldenrulebrew.com](http://goldenrulebrew.com))

### FEAST & FIELD MARKET, BARNARD

Live music-fueled farm market dinner parties on Thursday nights run by Fable Farm (cider and wines) offer a hyperlocal experience, with ciders and wines from the Fable Farm Fermentory and vendors such as Eastman Farm and Kiss the Cow Farm. (Runs May through September; sign up for notices, [feastandfield.com](http://feastandfield.com))

### VILLA VILLEKULLA FARM

Make sure you look for Lauren Gitlin's lustworthy goat milk skyr and goat butter at local retailers. A one-woman show, she makes delicious stuff from her goat herd; a line of naturally carbonated whey tonics is in development. ([villavillekullafarm.com](http://villavillekullafarm.com))