

Ontario wines – the road to their success

By Tony Aspler

The world may have embraced Ontario Icewine but the best kept secret is still Ontario's dry and semi-dry table wines. And its sparklers!

Riesling, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Gewurztraminer, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Gamay and Syrah – the noble grapes of Europe are all to be found in Ontario's vineyards. And they're producing wines that are increasingly bringing home medals from global competitions such as the Decanter World Wine Awards.

Perhaps the most symbolic confirmation of Ontario's arrival on the world wine scene is Ontario's annual Cool Climate Chardonnay Celebration (punningly known as I4C). This seminal event is held annually over three days in July on different winery properties in Niagara. Growers of Chardonnay from cool climate regions around the world are invited to show their wines alongside those produced by Canadian wineries. (For a list of the 150 wineries that participated in the 2015 event, see <http://www.coolchardonnay.org/page-wineries/>)

Ontario is the largest wine region in Canada and the best known internationally. At the time of writing, there were 169 operating wineries in the province (including fruit wineries), 132 of which produce appellation VQA wines (made from 100% Ontario grapes) and 26 of them produce sparkling wines.

The architecture of Ontario winery facilities ranges from the traditional French château style (Château des Charmes, Peller Estates, Two Sisters Winery) to Ontario Gothic (Peninsula Ridge, Angels Gate) to contemporary/modern (Jackson-Triggs, Stratus, Flat Rock, Fielding, and Huff).

The critical mass of wineries in the Niagara Peninsula has created a "Napa North" phenomenon. Fine restaurants, cooking classes, bike tours, concerts, theatre, jazz festivals, and winery events have generated a tourism boom that sees busloads of local and foreign visitors flocking through winery tasting rooms. After seeing Niagara Falls, everyone, it seems, wants to discover Ontario wines. It all adds up to a one compelling idea: Ontario wine is glamorous, and the world has begun to take notice.

Though it may seem to be an infant industry, Ontario wine is not an overnight occurrence. Its story dates back to the early nineteenth century. The cradle of the Canadian wine industry was not the Niagara Peninsula, where the greatest

vineyard acreage is to be found, but a good 70 kilometers east in a town named Cooksville . Today it's called Mississauga, a city of 766,000 people just west of Toronto. It was here on the banks of the Credit River that a retired German soldier, Corporal Johann Schiller, settled on 20 acres of land granted to him by the Crown for his military service in Canada.

There is some contention as to whether Schiller deserves the soubriquet as the 'Father of Canadian wine', but he certainly had winemaking experience in his native Rhineland. By 1811 he had domesticated the wild labrusca vines that grew along the banks of the Credit River and supplemented them with American hybrids furnished to him by settlers from Pennsylvania. Schiller made enough wine to satisfy his own needs and to sell to his neighbours.

The Americans not only sent their grapes north but their entrepreneurs too. In the 1860s most of the winemaking operations in Ontario were small-volume enterprises, a sideline for farmers who had crops other than grapes to harvest. In 1866 three gentlemen farmers from Kentucky who had been in the grape business for 14 years, purchased a farm on Pelee Island, Canada's most southerly point, in Lake Erie. They planted 30 acres that spring and a further 20 acres the following year. They named their winery Vin Villa, the stone ruins of which can still be seen on the island.

Fast forward to the 1970s. The accepted wisdom was that the Ontario wine industry would have to rely on hybrids (Maréchal Foch, Baco Noir, Seyval Blanc and Vidal) and labrusca varieties blended with off-shore wines because the severity of the winters made vinifera an unattainable dream.

But a few dedicated growers, including Bill Lenko and John Marynissen, defied the conventional wisdom and planted Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon in their Niagara Peninsula vineyards; and a youthful nurseryman named Donald Ziraldo supplied interested growers with vinifera plants from his Niagara-on-the-Lake farm. Hermann Weis, who owns St. Urbans-Hof winery in the Mosel, provided his Weis clone Riesling to growers and eventually set up his own winery, Vineland Estates, in Vineland, Ontario.

The seminal event in Ontario's wine story occurred in 1974, when Donald Ziraldo and his Austrian partner, Karl Kaiser, made the first batch of Maréchal Foch from their own grapes in a converted barn on the Niagara Parkway. The following year they got their licence as Inniskillin and moved to their current location just west of the Ziraldo nursery. The co-founders of Ontario's first new winery since Prohibition had one clear standard: 100 percent locally grown wines, preferably

vinifera. Inniskillin became the model for an exciting new breed of estate or farm wineries that made wines from their own vineyards: Château des Charmes (1978), Newark (1979, subsequently renamed Hillebrand and now Trius), Reif Estate (1982), Vineland Estates (1983), Konzelmann Estates (1984), Stoney Ridge (1985), Cave Spring Cellars (1986), and Henry of Pelham (1988).

The philosophies and practices of these new vintners were enshrined in the regulations of the appellation, Vintners Quality Alliance (VQA) - the single most important piece of legislation to save the industry from extinction. The small players had become the engine that propelled Ontario wines, dragging the large commercial players reluctantly along in their combined wake.

Once Ontario's VQA wines began to win medals in international competitions – and, more important, the hearts and taste buds of Ontario consumers – new entrepreneurs emerged to start their own wineries. Between 1990 and 2003 the total rose to thirty-six. This second wave of small wineries included farmers who saw bigger profits from making wine than from selling their grapes to the major wineries.

It also included second careerists who had been successful in other enterprises and looked at wineries as both an investment and a lifestyle choice. Martin Malivoire came from the movie business; Norman Beal of Peninsula Ridge retired from the petroleum industry; Moray Tawse from finance; Harald Thiel of Hidden Bench owned an audio-visual company; David Feldberg of Stratus, a furniture corporation; John Howard of Megalomaniac was a top executive at Canon, and the family of Angela and Melissa Marotta (Two Sisters Winery) own a large construction company.

While the old guard were influenced by their winemaking experience in France and Germany or by their taste for European wines, the new winemakers were more New World oriented. They had been trained in oenology in Australia, had winemaking experience in South Africa, New Zealand, and the United States, or were the first graduates in winemaking from Ontario's Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute (CCOVI) at Brock University and from Niagara College Teaching Winery.

Today Niagara wineries are producing wines which capture stylistically the freshness and elegance of Burgundy, Bordeaux and the Rhône with the mouth-feel and extract of Carneros, Oregon and New Zealand. The strong suits are

Chardonnay and Riesling, Cabernet Franc, Pinot Noir, Gamay and, surprisingly, Syrah.

Niagara's ability to keep vinifera vines alive and produce fine wines is determined by the presence of Lake Ontario - the smallest of the Great Lakes that acts as a 'hot water bottle' for the vineyards in winter. The vineyards of the plain (marl, sand and clay soil) slope up to the Niagara Escarpment where soils are a mixture of boulders, gravel, sand, silt and clay, as well as bits of shale, sandstone and limestone. These soil differences and the fact that temperature readings are warmer on the plain make for two distinct wine styles: more robust wines on the plain where Bordeaux varieties can ripen and more elegant, nuanced wines on the Benches, especially Riesling.

The industry is currently redefining itself with sub-appellations in the Niagara Peninsula, an exercise in differentiating soil types and microclimates which will add another layer of sophistication and complexity to consumer choice. There are ten such sub-appellations, each with its unique growing conditions suited to different grape varieties: Niagara River, Niagara Lakeshore, Four Mile Creek, St David's Bench, Creek Shores, Lincoln Lakeshore, Short Hills Bench, Twenty Mile Bench, Beamsville Bench, and Vinemount Ridge.

In addition, two regional appellations have been created: Niagara Escarpment for the bench area west of St Catharines (Short Hills Bench, Twenty Mile Bench, Beamsville Bench) and Niagara-on-the-Lake for the four sub-appellations east of St Catharines.

The emergence of a third viticultural area in Ontario, Prince Edward County, to join Niagara Peninsula and Lake Erie North Shore/ Pelee Island is only the beginning of this quest for new and less costly land on which to plant vineyards. Already intrepid growers are moving as far north as Thunder Bay, Owen Sound, Roseneath, and Collingwood and as far east as Chesterville. With global warming, who knows how far north vineyards will be planted in Ontario's future?

(For recommendations see the winning wines from the Ontario Wine Awards 2015 at

http://www.ontariowineawards.ca/pdf/OWA-2015_list_of_winners.pdf)

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