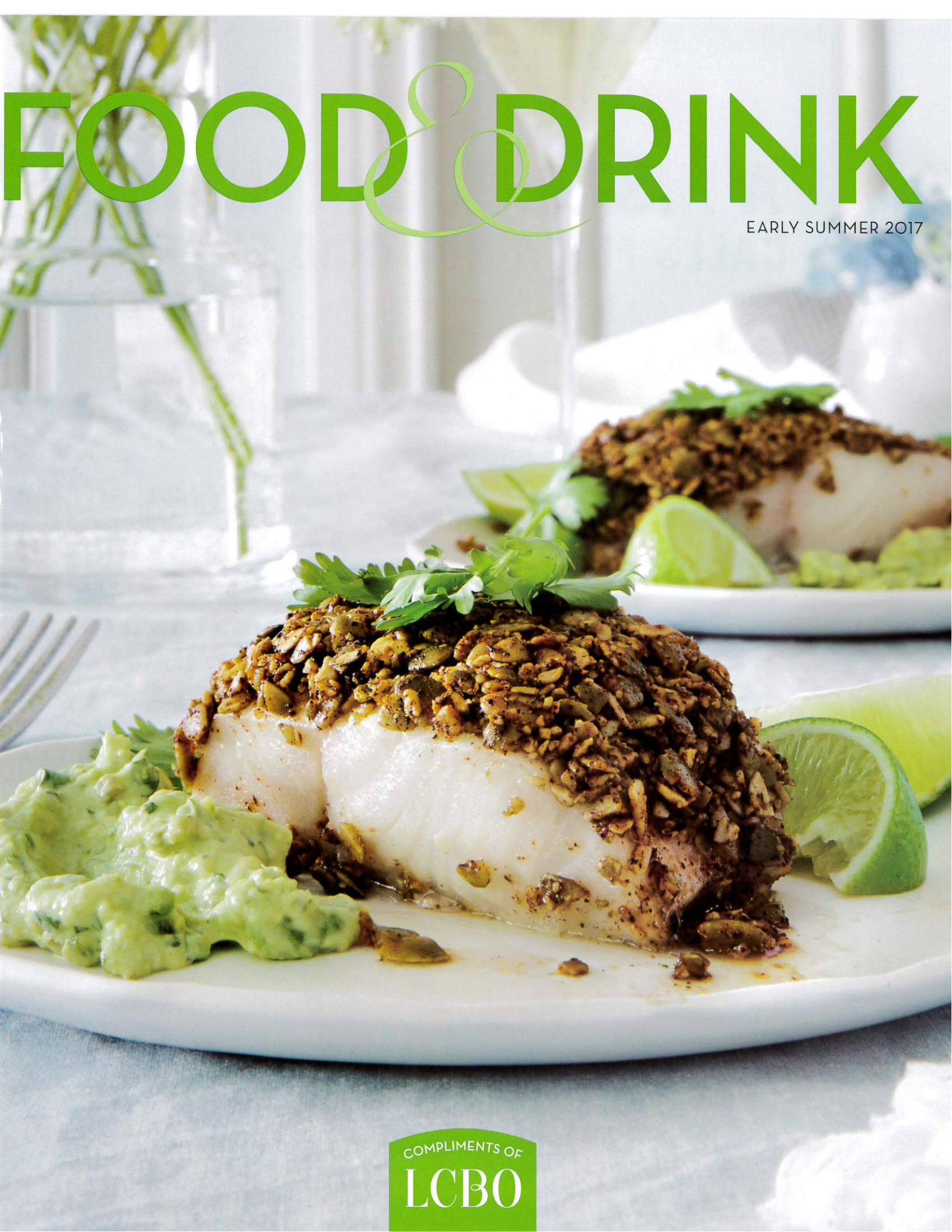


# FOOD & DRINK

EARLY SUMMER 2017



COMPLIMENTS OF  
**LCBO**



# CELEBRATING CHARDONNAY

BY JAMES CHATTO • PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIRGINIA MACDONALD

Plan ahead to attend Niagara's i4C weekend—an annual public event celebrating cool-climate Chardonnays, drawing winemakers from around the world. Herewith, a look back at last year's event, to give you an idea of what to expect.

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**SATURDAY. TAWSE WINERY.** Hottest day of the year. A long and elegant lunch beside the vineyard, shaded from the blazing July sun by a white canvas canopy. The sky was as blue as the distant lake, a musician played; the company and the conversation were delightful. We were there to find out how world-class Chardonnays tasted alongside superb seafood—not so much a scientific experiment, perhaps, as an excuse for unbridled hedonistic pleasure. Among a dozen delights we tasted Tawse's own Quarry Road Chardonnay with oysters and scallops, then Maison Champy's 2013 Puligny-Montrachet with tremblingly juicy, butter-poached lobster... It was an entirely idyllic afternoon, quintessential Niagara, and no one wanted to leave—except there was a party to go to.

And that was just one small moment from last summer's i4C weekend—the International Cool Climate Chardonnay Celebration. Just six years old, it has become one of the can't-miss gatherings on the globe-trotting wine lover's calendar, packed with serious discussions, master classes and tastings from the world's leading proponents of Chardonnay and with two very different evening events that could each qualify as the party of the year.

For information on this year's i4C event, July 21-23, visit [coolchardonnay.org](http://coolchardonnay.org).

## HOW DID IT ALL BEGIN?

With a small, private celebration between a group of Ontario wine producers, toasting the victory of an Ontario Chardonnay over renowned Burgundian and Californian Chardonnays at the 2009 Cellier Wine Awards in Montreal. That night, the conversation evolved into a question: Why not create a celebration for all cool-climate Chardonnays, and invite the world to come? A year later, 28 Ontario wineries were on board, a not-for-profit group dedicated to creating “a casual but in-depth weekend celebration of wine, food and learning,” and in the summer of 2011, the first i4C took place, to a most enthusiastic response. Since then, over 150 wineries from 37 cool-climate regions around the world have taken part; over 670 cool-climate Chardonnays have been poured and over 10,000 people have visited and enjoyed the Celebration.



DAY

Friday

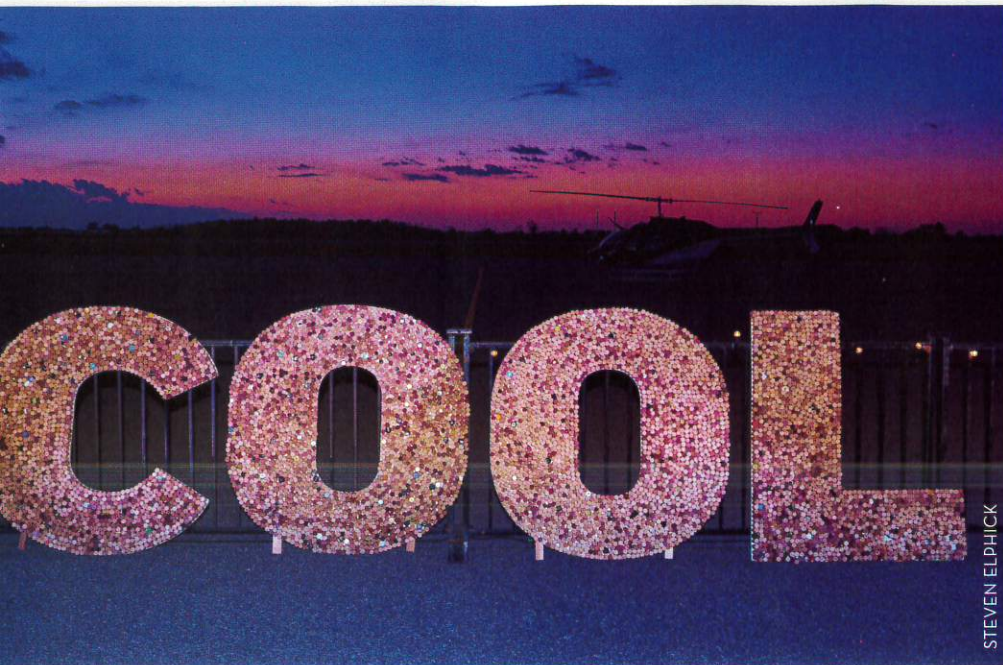
## SCHOOL OF COOL

→ **THE WEEKEND BEGINS** with an all-day symposium in the huge and elegant Grand Event Space at White Oaks conference centre. Like all the big events of the Celebration, it had sold out long ago. Sitting in front of the first tasting flight of wines, the crowd of 360 listen to the eloquent moderator, Master Sommelier John Szabo, explain what lies ahead—an address by Rome-based keynote speaker, Ian D’Agata of *Decanter* magazine, followed by seminars on harvest timing, cellaring and whole-cluster winemaking. There are many industry professionals in the audience, but they are heavily outnumbered by amateur wine lovers—like the man sitting next to me. “This is so great!” he enthuses. “I’m such a wine geek! My daughter bought me this for my birthday.”

He learns a lot today. So do I. The level of discussion is nicely pitched—always interesting and entertaining, but arcane enough to satisfy the true aficionados. It’s fascinating to hear leading winemakers from around the world talk about their challenges and solutions and compare them with those facing winemakers in Ontario. Several of them declare that it’s a treat to be here in a collegial rather than a competitive atmosphere. The audience are invited to text in questions and the blind tastings provide excellent illustrations of the points being made. Two special seminars end the afternoon—one on Chablis, the other on glassware. By then I’m ready to experience wine in a rather less cerebral way. My carriage awaits! The weekend is impeccably well organized with hundreds of volunteers assisting guests and shuttle rides to all events. Time to climb aboard and head off to Niagara airport.



**SPOILT FOR CHOICE!** There are so many events and locations to choose from on an i4C Saturday. Last year I went to Tawse winery and the VISA Infinite luncheon where Chef Victor Barry of Piano Piano in Toronto cooked that fabulous lobster. It too had an educational component, with a tutored tasting led by John Szabo and Tawse's stellar winemaker, Paul Pender, who drew on fabulous Chardonnays from the library of wines built up over the last six years. Guests also had a unique opportunity to sit down and talk with expert winery owners and vinticulturalists from around the world.

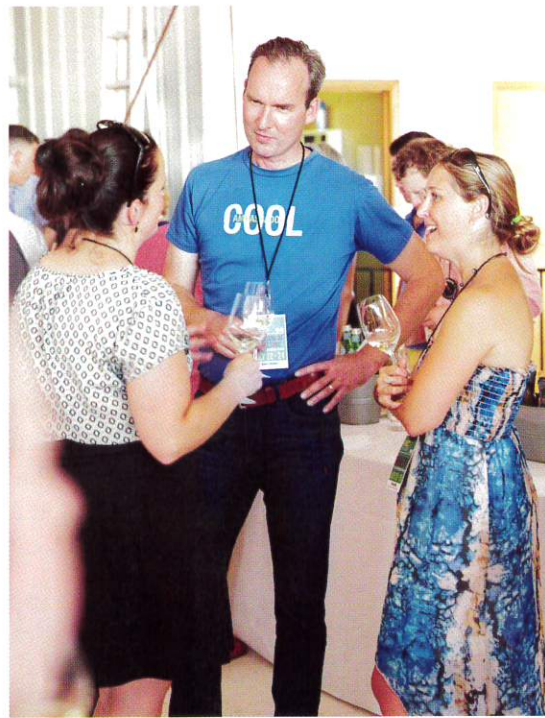
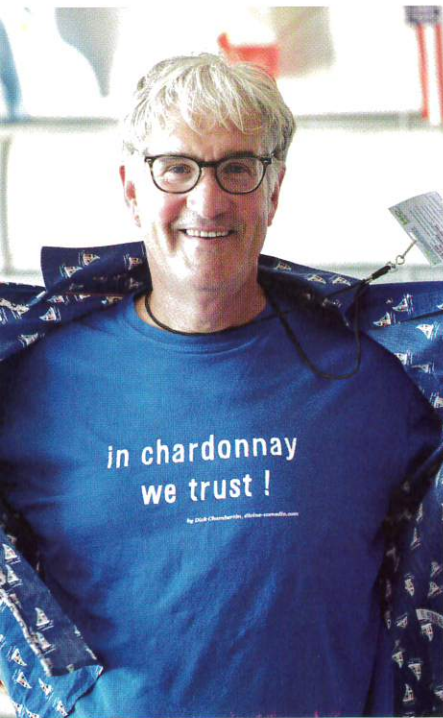


STEVEN ELPHICK

Friday Evening

## FLIGHTS OF CHARDONNAY

➔ “I’VE DRIVEN BY this airport all my life and I’ve never been inside before!” I heard that a lot on Friday evening as 500 guests spilled in and out of the airport’s enormous metal hangar. Was it the hottest evening of the year? Ironic to hold a cool-climate celebration when temperatures in Niagara were more sweltering than they were in Miami. Nobody cared. There was live music and great food from stations set up by local restaurants. The Chardonnays poured over this weekend might be from around the world but the food is resolutely and deliciously local—hard to beat crispy fried duck liver with a foie gras garnish and cherry compote from The Garrison House, stuffed zucchini blossoms from Backhouse, and oysters from Tide & Vine. Huge kudos to the two local chefs who collated the food for the entire weekend—Craig Youdale of the Canadian Food & Wine Institute at Niagara College and Paul Harber of Ravine Vineyard. Meanwhile, winemakers poured scores of Chardonnays and talked up a storm at this delightfully casual, exceedingly merry party. Part of the fun was the price of admission—just \$45 for the four-and-a-half-hour event, including the opportunity to taste plenty of world-class wines.



## JAMES’S LOCAL PICKS

Travelling across Canada every year, I’m always surprised that many people still don’t know how spectacular Ontario Chardonnay can be. Here are two highly accomplished ambassadors for the province. Tawse Sketches of Niagara Chardonnay (VINTAGES 89037, \$21.95) is impeccably balanced around its infrastructure of firm, fresh acidity. Elegantly middleweight, it weaves pear and peach fruitiness with just enough spicy vanilla oak; then, just when you think it’s said all it has to say, a final note of minerality sweeps in.

Bachelor Niagara Chardonnay (VINTAGES ESSENTIALS 302083, \$25.25) is another star, a touch more full-bodied and intense and full of tangy apricot and peach aromas braided with creamy, smoky oak. It too has an elegant acidity that lifts these flavours high and a final flourish of Niagara Benchland minerality.



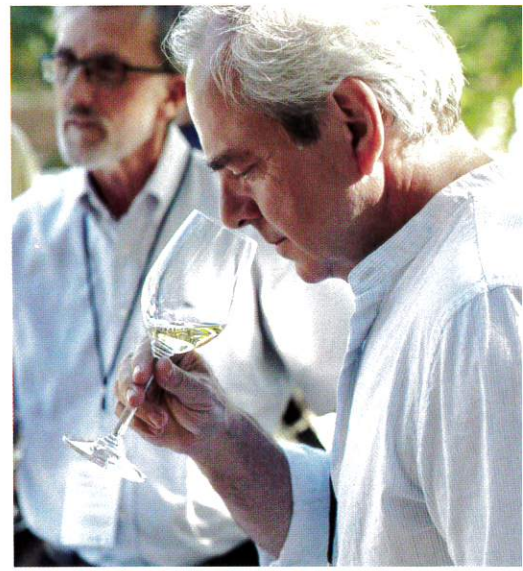
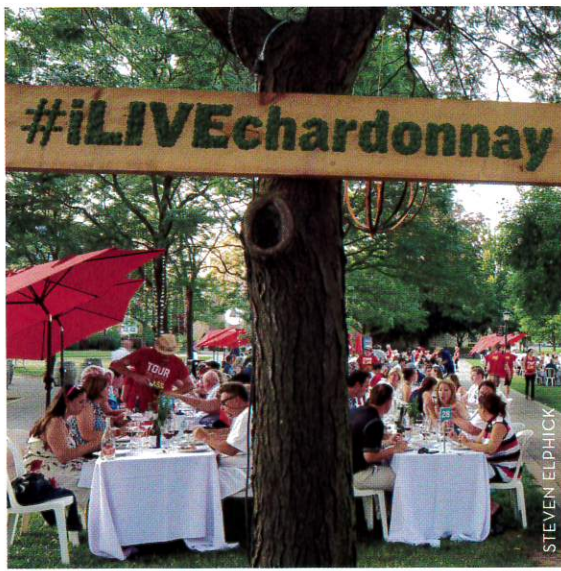


Saturday

## OUT AND ABOUT

→ **EVERY YEAR**, the roster of local wineries involved with i4C changes—as does the list of visiting winemakers from other regions, countries and continents, and the agenda of topics up for discussion. In 2016, we were invited to explore a dozen subjects from organic growing to climate change, from the different challenges facing Chardonnay in Alsace and Patagonia to the infinite nuances of Chablis.

Unforgettable pleasures are guaranteed in 2017, whether your interests lie in academic seminars at Niagara College Teaching Winery, practical workshops in Niagara vineyards and wineries, guided tours and tastings with leading local Chardonnay winemakers, or a first-class lunch with great wine and conversation. With careful planning you can fit in a couple of events. Check out the i4C website, [coolchardonnay.org](http://coolchardonnay.org), to see exactly what's in store this year and to read about 2017's keynote speaker, U.S. wine writer and consultant Karen MacNeil. Based in Napa, California, MacNeil is the author of *The Wine Bible* and the only American to have won every major wine communication award given in the English language.





Saturday Evening

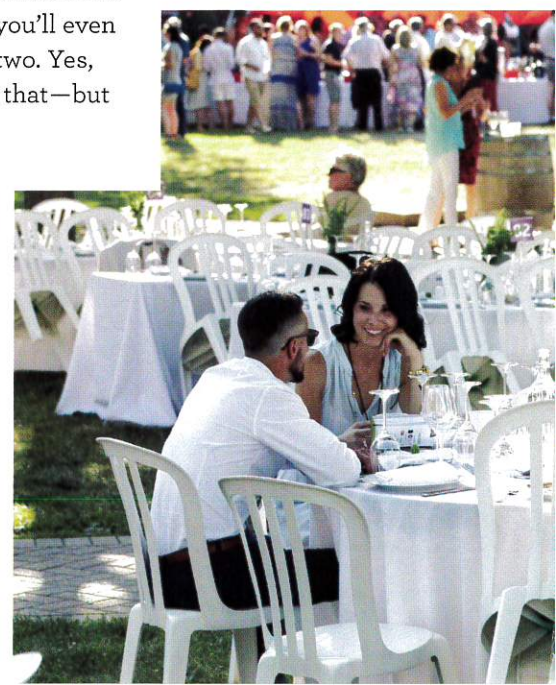
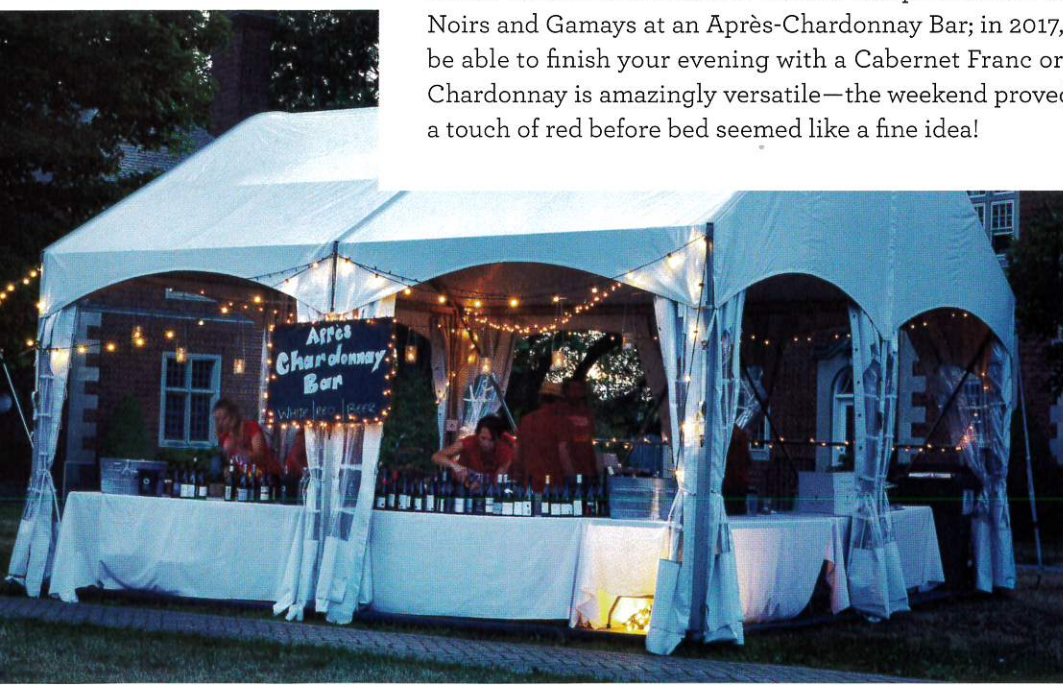
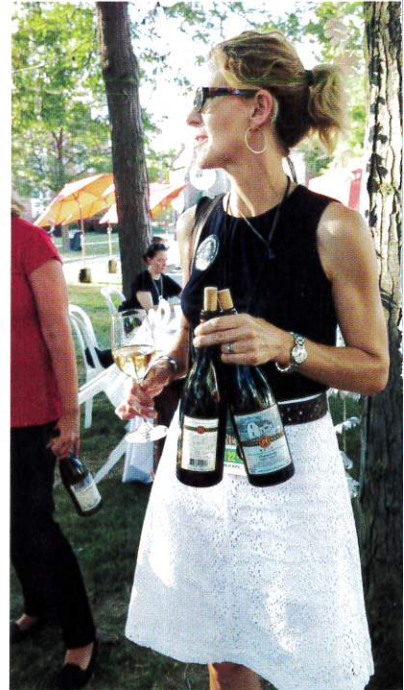
## THE GRAND TASTING AND DINNER



→ **GRAND INDEED!** At 5 o'clock, 1,000 beautifully dressed guests gathered at Ridley College for a tasting of every single Chardonnay and sparkling Blanc de Blanc that the weekend had to offer. The venerable school looked serene and welcoming (many people mentioned that it reminded them of Harry Potter's Hogwarts) and the tasting stations were comfortably spread out across the manicured lawns. International winemakers poured their finest and while some wine buffs were still busy taking notes, the mood was more social than serious.

At 7:30, it was time to make our way to the linen-clad tables under the trees for an al fresco, family-style feast prepared by eight of Niagara's finest chefs. The ambience was magical in the twilight, with lights twinkling in the branches above us. Strangers quickly became friends over such treats as wood-fired pork loin, salt-baked wild salmon with pearl couscous tabouleh, and Ontario beef strip-loin with smoked bacon sauerkraut.

After dinner, inspired by the romance of the occasion, couples took to the dance floor, but many lingered at the table to greet some welcome glasses of red wine. This year, the organizers had expanded the weekend's mandate to include exceptional cool-climate Pinot Noirs and Gamays at an *Après-Chardonnay Bar*; in 2017, you'll even be able to finish your evening with a Cabernet Franc or two. Yes, Chardonnay is amazingly versatile—the weekend proved that—but a touch of red before bed seemed like a fine idea!







Sunday Morning

## BRUNCH ON THE BENCH

→ **ST. DAVID'S BENCH**, that is. Ravine Vineyard winery was the venue for a delightfully casual finale to the celebrations, catered by Chef Ross Midgley and his team. It's a time to kick back under the marquee or beside the vineyards, listen to some low-key acoustic entertainment, and think back over the busy weekend. Brunch itself is fabulous—a score of treats from oysters and ribs to veggie melts from the wood-burning oven, from smoked pork loins and barbecued chicken to peach and apricot platz. Brunch returns to Ravine in 2017. Book now—it sells out quickly!

## JAMES'S INTERNATIONAL PICKS

Every year at i4C, half the wines poured come from somewhere other than Niagara. It's a great opportunity to taste and learn about the best cool-climate Chardonnays from around the world and it leaves everyone with a vivid impression of the broadly different styles these wines can achieve. Consider, for example, Sonoma-Cutrer Russian River Ranches Chardonnay (VINTAGES ESSENTIALS 608653, \$27.95) from the cool, foggy southern reaches of Sonoma. "Juicy" is the word that immediately springs to mind—as in succulent, tangy stone fruit and citrus flavours with a rich custard-apple creaminess and oaky spice. The overall balance makes this one of my favourite Californian Chards.

In an altogether different key, Domaine Laroche Saint Martin Chablis (LCBO 289124, \$22.95) is a super exemplar of Chablis, grown on the region's famous sea-shell Kimmeridgian soils. Sharp, minerally and clean, it's an almost austere white wine, with faint suggestions of green apple, lemon and white flowers—unerringly precise.

