

VINOGRAPHY®: a wine blog

Wine and food adventures in San Francisco and around the world

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The Brilliance of Canadian Chardonnay



Less than an hour from Buffalo, New York, some of the best Chardonnay I've tasted in years is being made, and practically no one in America knows about it. If Americans think of anything when it comes to Canadian wine, they almost always think of icewine. Just why this treasure trove of crisp and bright lemony Chardonnay goodness has remained almost completely off the radar of American wine lovers is a topic for another time.

Right now, I simply need to tell you that Canada's province of Ontario is making some seriously world-class Chardonnay. I found out about it first in Austria, of all places, hanging out with a couple of Canadian-Hungarians who insisted that there were revelations to be had at Ontario's annual International Cool Climate Chardonnay Conference, known affectionately as i4C.

A year later, an invitation arrived in my inbox to attend, and I now consider myself a full-fledged convert.

Canada's Ontario Province curves around the western end of Lake Ontario to meet up with the back corner of New York State in a famously spectacular fashion. The divide between the two countries marked by the jaw-dropping power of Niagara Falls sees an average of 12 million visitors each year, just slightly less than the number visiting Disneyland.

Ontario Province is home to more than 150 wineries which sit between the 41st and 44th parallel, putting them right in between the latitudes of California wine country and Oregon wine country, a trick of geography that shocks most Americans who tend to think of Canada as some version of the Great White North. With a

climate moderated by the great lakes (though somewhat more extreme in winter than many other wine regions) the region is smack dab in the sweet spot for what we know as cool-climate viticulture.

More impressively, the region's geologic history, which involves ancient seabeds buried for eons and then exposed through glacial actions has resulted in one of the highest quantities of exposed limestone in any Western Hemisphere winegrowing area. This limestone influence, similar to that of Burgundy and Champagne, contributes in no small way to the quality and potential of the region's wines. The key topographic features marking the region's winegrowing areas are known locally as benches. These north-facing slopes of eroded rock and clay were pushed down off of the nearby Niagara Escarpment by glaciers and have become the basis for several of the region's appellations, such as Twenty Mile Bench, Beamsville Bench, and Short Hills Bench.

As any Burgundy lover might expect from this kind of limestone-rich geology, the region produces both Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, but the Niagara Peninsula has also become well known for Cabernet Franc as well as Riesling.

Originally planted with Lambrusca and other native hybrids in 1811, the region saw its first plantings of *vitis vinifera* grapes in 1952, but little traction until the late 70s when plantings began in earnest. The province's appellation system, governed by the Vintner's Quality Alliance, was established in 1988.

Today, the region boasts 17,000 acres of grape vines that produce more than \$350 million Canadian dollars worth of wine each year. Of which, by my estimation, about \$1017.36 makes it to the United States, mostly illegally imported by Canadians and savvy New Yorkers in the trunks of their cars. OK, so the real numbers are \$38.6 million worth of wine exported from Canada to the US last year (up from a paltry \$4.9 million in 2001), with the vast majority probably being icewine.



The i4C Grand Dinner and Tasting

So yes, this is another one of those occasional posts where I'll be reviewing wines that, for the most part, my American readers can't get their hands on. But that's not the point (as much as I'd like to help my Canadian friends sell their wares). The point is for you to know that Canada is making some of the finest Chardonnay in North America, and that the wines are definitely worth the extra effort to seek out.

There are more stories to tell about the wines, and some of the people to produce them, but as I was penned into the conference for the weekend, without much opportunity to go wander through vineyards and spend quality time with producers, for now what I've got for you are simply my reviews of the many wines I tasted over the weekend I was there. On the rare occasion that a wine is available in the U.S. I've provided a link to find it online.

Ontario is still a young wine region, and so as a group the wines are a mixed bag. They were by no means universally great, and I've included notes for the whole range of wines I tasted to give you a complete picture of what's on offer. Just pay attention to the stuff near the top of the list and you'll find excellent wines that, when you can buy them, are also fantastic values for the money.

Most of these notes were made from the safe and quiet enclave of the media room at the event, where organizers very helpfully put a couple of bottles of nearly every wine being poured at the event for journalists to sample at their leisure, sitting down, with computers in tow.

FIRST.... BUBBLES!:

2010 Henry of Pelham Cuvee "Catherine Carte Blanche Blanc de Blancs" Chardonnay, Ontario, Canada

Pale greenish gold in the glass with medium fine bubbles, this wine smells of yeasty brioche and sea air. In the mouth, gorgeously yeasty, saline and lemon pith flavors take on a green apple and stony character in a nice finish. Great acidity. Score: around **9**.

NV Cave Spring Cellars "Blanc de Blancs" Chardonnay, Ontario, Canada

Pale gold in the glass with medium bubbles, this wine smells of linalool, red apples, and wet chalkboard. In the mouth, chalky flavors of apple skin mix with citrus pith. Good acidity and length. Score: around **8.5**.

2008 Angel's Gate "Zero Dosage" Chardonnay, Ontario, Canada

Light gold in the glass with very fine bubbles, this wine smells of butter biscuits. In the mouth, apple flavors turn slightly plasticky eventually, but good acidity keeps things peppy. Not very refined or deep. Score: between **8** and **8.5**.

2011 Angel's Gate "Archangel" Chardonnay, Ontario, Canada

Pale gold in the glass with very fine, sparse bubbles, this wine smells of wet chalkboard and unripe apples. In the mouth, flavors of crabapples and pomelo zest mix with wet chalkboard minerality. Good acidity but somewhat austere. Score: around **8**.

WINES WITH A SCORE AROUND 9.5

2013 Norman Hardie "County" Chardonnay, Prince Edward County, Ontario, Canada

Pale greenish gold in the glass, this wine smells of tangy lemon sorbet and toasted sourdough. In the mouth this wine has incredible power and depth with amazing yuzu and grapefruit pith flavors that rocket electrically around the palate. Amazing stony depth, with a tannic structure that is quite astonishing. Failed to note alcohol level.

2013 Norman Hardie "Cuvee des Amis" Chardonnay, Prince Edward County, Ontario, Canada

Pale greenish gold in the glass, this wine smells of wet stones and the pith of exotic citrus. In the mouth, gorgeous sweetlime and wet stone flavors have a fantastic mineral depth. Amazing depth and stony resonance. Fantastic acid. A single barrel of wine bottled only in magnum. 12.0% alcohol.

WINES WITH A SCORE BETWEEN 9 AND 9.5

2012 Bachelder "Wismer Vineyard" Chardonnay, Twenty Mile Bench, Ontario, Canada

Pale gold in color, this wine smells of wet stones, oak, and citrus oil. In the mouth, wonderfully sappy lemon juice and wet stone mix with a modicum of new oak that adds both a creamy texture and some lovely vanilla notes. Gorgeous and long. 13% alcohol.

2012 Malivoire "Moira" Chardonnay, Beamsville Bench, Ontario, Canada

Pale gold in color, this wine smells of wet stones and white flowers. In the mouth gorgeously silky flavors of lemon curd and wet stones are touched with the toasty vanilla of oak and finish with a gorgeous note of candied grapefruit. Fantastic acidity and balance. A really great Chardonnay. 13% alcohol.

2013 Domaine Queylus "Tradition" Chardonnay, Niagara Peninsula, Ontario, Canada

Light gold in the glass, this wine smells of lemon curd and bright lemon juice. In the mouth, positively electric lemon flavors have a fabulous bright vibrance as they migrate to pink grapefruit towards the finish. Totally outstanding. 13% alcohol.

2012 Norman Hardie "County" Chardonnay, Prince Edward County, Ontario, Canada - \$33

Light gold in color, this wine smells of lemon sorbet and lemon peel and white flowers. In the mouth, lemon curd and lemon peel are layered over a deep, taut, wet chalkboard minerality that is quite refreshing.

Wonderful, faint notes of tangy resin linger in the finish. 12.5% on the label, but Norm says more like 11.8% alcohol. [click to buy.](#)

2012 Norman Hardie Chardonnay, Niagara, Ontario, Canada - \$30

Light gold in the glass, this wine smells of bright lemon sorbet and tangy resinous tang. In the mouth wonderfully tangy lemon, lemon sorbet, and pink grapefruit sit against a gorgeous deep minerality. Gorgeously silky texture and wonderful tangy orange peel notes that linger in the finish. 12.9% alcohol. [click to buy.](#)

2013 Norman Hardie Chardonnay, Niagara, Ontario, Canada

Light gold in the glass, this wine smells of lemon peel and wet chalkboard. In the mouth the wine makes the tongue tingle with incredible acidity and mineral depth. Wonderful chalkiness mixes with lemon pith and pomelo through a very long finish. 12.7% alcohol.

WINES WITH A SCORE AROUND 9

2012 Hidden Bench "Felseck Vineyard" Chardonnay, Beamsville Bench, Ontario, Canada

Pale gold in the glass, this wine smells of lemon curd and wet stones and a hint of honey. In the mouth, rich lemon curd and peach and a hint of orange peel mix with bright acidity and great length. Somewhat rich, but quite balanced and juicy. 13.5% alcohol.

2012 Le Clos Jordanne "Claystone Terrace" Chardonnay, Twenty Mile Bench, Ontario, Canada

Light gold in the glass, this wine smells of warm bread and lemon curd. In the mouth a wonderful pure lemon curd and citrus peel brightness is borne on a silky textured, multi-layered stream across the palate. Wonderful underlying minerality and great acidity balance the richness of fruit. Excellent.

2012 Tawse Winery "Quarry Road Vineyard" Chardonnay, Niagara, Ontario, Canada

Palest greenish gold in color, this wine smells of cold cream, lemon and lime zest and grapefruit. In the mouth bright grapefruit and cold cream flavors have citrus zest and a hint of white peach. Excellent acidity and balance. Very fresh and crisp. 13% alcohol.

WINES WITH A SCORE BETWEEN 8.5 AND 9

2013 Hidden Bench Chardonnay, Ontario, Canada

Pale gold in the glass, this wine smells of wet chalkboard and Asian pears and white flowers. In the mouth, flavors of baked apples and ripe golden apples mix with lemon juice and pith. Bright acidity makes the flavors vibrate and resonate on the palate. 13% alcohol

2013 Stratus Vineyards Chardonnay, Ontario, Canada

Pale greenish gold in the glass, this wine smells of wet chalkboard, green apple, baked apple, and cold cream. In the mouth, green apple brightness mixes with wet stones and white flowers. Bright acidity and wonderfully floral, long finish of wet chalkboard, including a tannic quality. 13.4% alcohol.

2011 Pearl Morissette "Cuvee Dix-Neuvieme" Chardonnay, Ontario, Canada - \$30

Pale gold in the glass, this wine smells of green apple and white peach. In the mouth slightly tropical fruit flavors mix with green apples, a light sweetness and a hint of wet chalkboard minerality. Good acidity and length. [click to buy.](#)

2013 Domaine Queylus "Réserve du Domaine" Chardonnay, Niagara Peninsula, Ontario, Canada

Light gold in the glass, this wine smells of lemon curd and wet stones. In the mouth slightly tropical fruit flavors mix with lemon curd and cold cream. Rich and broad, but with a nice saline kick at the end of it all. Perhaps more rich than I'd like but a very nicely made wine. 13% alcohol. [click to buy.](#)

2013 Hidden Bench Vineyards and Winery "Estate" Chardonnay, Beamsville Bench, Ontario, Canada - \$20

Pale gold in the glass, this wine smells of lemon curd and melted butter with a hint of white flowers. In the mouth, smooth and rich flavors of lemon curd and citrus peel mix with wet stones and white flowers. Nice acidity and length, with a weighty feel to it. 13% alcohol. [click to buy.](#)

2010 Stoney Ridge Estate Winery "Excellence" Chardonnay, Niagara, Lincoln Lakeshore, Ontario, Canada

Light gold in the glass, this wine smells of lemon curd and melted butter. In the mouth, bright lemon curd and toasted oak meld nicely with overtones of white flowers. Finishes with a touch of alcoholic heat. 13.8% alcohol.

WINES WITH A SCORE AROUND 8.5

2013 Malivoire Chardonnay, Beamsville Bench, Ontario, Canada

Pale greenish gold in color, this wine smells of bright lemon curd and a bit of white flowers. In the mouth, juicy and bright apple and lemon curd flavors mix with cold cream and wet stones. Nice balance, but not horribly complex. 12.5% alcohol.

2012 Flat Rock Cellars Chardonnay, Ontario, Twenty Mile Bench, Ontario, Canada

Palest greenish gold in the glass, this wine smells of lime and cucumber and sweet cold cream. In the mouth candied lime and margarita salt mix with cold cream and white flowers. Good acidity and length.

2011 Tawse Winery Estate Chardonnay, Niagara, Ontario, Canada - \$23

Pale greenish gold in color, this wine smells of wet stones and citrus pith. In the mouth, bright citrus pith and wet pavement flavors have a lean narrow quality, leaving a green SweetTart character in the mouth. Quite peppy, but lacking some depth. 13% alcohol. [click to buy.](#)

WINES WITH A SCORE BETWEEN 8 AND 8.5

2013 Two Sisters Unoaked Chardonnay, Ontario, Canada

Near colorless in the glass, this wine smells of poached pears and cream mixed with brewers yeast. In the mouth, lots of green apple and pear mix with a hint of pink grapefruit. Good acidity and length, but with bitterness in the finish. 12.5% alcohol.

2012 Tawse "Quarry Road" Chardonnay, Ontario, Canada

Palest gold in the glass, this wine smells of green apple, white flowers, and wet stones. In the mouth, deeply chalky flavors are touched with hints of green apple and white flowers. Lean to the point of being austere. Missing some depth.

2012 Stratus Chardonnay, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Canada

Pale greenish gold in the glass, this wine smells of lemon curd, oak, and butterscotch. In the mouth, slightly sweet flavors of lemon curd, pineapple, and cold cream have a very silky aspect but not the acid kick I'd like. Lots of oak signature on the finish. 13.3% alcohol.

2013 Peller Estate "Private Reserve" Chardonnay, Niagara Peninsula, Ontario, Canada

Pale gold in the glass, this wine smells of white flowers and cold cream. In the mouth, this wine has a peachy, apricot quality that tastes quite unlike Chardonnay. Rich but with nice acidity, this is definitely on the riper side of the universe. 13.3% alcohol.

2012 Flat Rock Cellars "The Rusty Shed" Chardonnay, Twenty Mile Bench, Ontario, Canada

Palest greenish gold in the glass, this wine smells of wet chalkboard and margarita mix. In the mouth, lean lime and cucumber flavors have a light bitter vegetal quality that lingers a long time, replaced after some time with a light floral sweetness. 13.5% alcohol.

2013 Quails Gate "Stewart Family Reserve" Chardonnay, Okanagan Valley, British Columbia, Canada

Pale gold in color, this wine smells of rich, sappy lemon curd and oak. In the mouth, rich lemon curd and new oak flavors have a nice complexion but there's just too much oak influence for the clearly very good fruit to shine. Lemon and Meyer lemon fruit linger with a hint of sweetness in the finish, along with the wood, of course. 13% alcohol.

WINES WITH A SCORE AROUND 8

2012 Niagara College Teaching Winery "Balance" Unoaked Chardonnay, Ontario, Canada

Near colorless in the glass, this wine smells of green apples and unripe Asian pear. In the mouth, green apple and a hint of grassiness makes for a somewhat angular flavor profile. Great acidity, but missing some complexity. 13.1% alcohol.

2013 Cave Spring Cellars "Cave Spring Vineyard" Chardonnay, Beamsville Bench, Ontario, Canada

Pale gold in the glass, this wine smells of slightly yeasty apple and lemon curd. In the mouth, that yeasty quality continues with notes of golden apple and brown sugar mixed with lemon curd brightness. Good acidity, but I'm not loving the yeasty quality. 13% alcohol.

WINES WITH A SCORE BETWEEN 7.5 AND 8

2013 Château des Charmes Chardonnay Musqué, Niagara, Ontario, Canada

Light greenish gold in the glass, this wine smells of sweet cucumber and lime popsicle. In the mouth, lime zest and a hint of vegetal greenness mix with bright zippy acidity. Somewhat bitter and green.

WINES WITH A SCORE AROUND 7.5

2010 Angel's Gate "Old Vines" Chardonnay, Beamsville Bench, Ontario, Canada

Light gold in color, this wine smells of pineapple and dried mango. In the mouth rich and quite ripe flavors of pineapple and tinned peaches and candied lemon rind turn bitter in the finish. Too ripe even considering the modest, 13.5% alcohol.

2013 Westcott "Lillias" Chardonnay, Vinemount Ridge, Ontario, Canada

Nearly colorless in the glass, this wine smells of lemon pith and butterscotch. In the mouth, slightly yeasty flavors of lemon and apple sit somewhat dead on the palate. 13% alcohol.

2013 Pillitteri Estates Winery "Barrel Fermented Reserve" Chardonnay, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Canada

Near colorless in the glass, this wine smells of tropical fruits. In the mouth, pineapple and dried mango mix with bitter notes of melted butter. 13.5% alcohol

2013 Iniskillin Reserve Chardonnay, Niagara Peninsula, Ontario, Canada

Near colorless in the glass, this wine smells of apple and baked apples. In the mouth, yeasty flavors of apple and lemon curd have a nice juicy acidic kick, but I don't like the brown sugar and yeast quality that lingers in the finish. 13% alcohol.

WINES WITH A SCORE AROUND 7

2013 Jackson-Triggs "Grand Reserve" Chardonnay, Niagara Peninsula, Ontario, Canada

Light yellow-gold in color, this wine smells of rich topical fruits and pineapple. In the mouth exceedingly ripe flavors of pineapple and dried mango mix with lemon curd and a bitter woody quality that is unappealing. Too ripe. 14% alcohol.

2011 Stoney Ridge Estate Winery "Excellence" Chardonnay, Niagara, Ontario, Canada

Light greenish gold in color, this wine smells of candied pineapple. In the mouth, the wine has a confectioned quality, with candied pineapple and candied lemon peel. Very candied in quality, and overdone. 13.5% alcohol.

WINES WITH A SCORE BETWEEN 6.5 AND 7

2011 Poplar Grove Winery "Reserve" Chardonnay, Okanagan Valley, Ontario, Canada

Pale greenish gold in the glass, this wine smells of pineapple and melted butter. In the mouth pineapple and baked apples have a slightly bitter and angular character with a narrow expression of fruit. Ugh. 12.7% alcohol.