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Andrew Jefford

'Ontario wines: a "middle-earth" position between Old and New Worlds'

CANADA'S SIZE CHALLENGES the imagination. Given its position on our earth, as Russia's dancing partner around the Arctic circle, you might wonder that it produces any wine at all. Agreed, Toronto lies south of Bordeaux and Turin, but its dauntingly continental climate and the fact that the polar jet stream dips down over its entire landmass in winter makes this one of the toughest places on earth to grow wine.

Three tiny vineyard areas make Ontario the biggest Canadian wine-producing state. Those 6,900ha of vineyard are less than 0.001% of the country's landmass – yet, significantly, one-third of Canada's population lives within an hour's drive of the vines. I visited the Niagara Peninsula, source of most of Ontario's wine, in a lucky gap between two polar blasts this January. It was only -7°C or so, rather than the -22°C it had been a week earlier or the -19°C it was a week later (subtract a further 10°C from all these figures for wind chill).

Icewine, of course, is one beneficial legacy of these stern winters: between November and March, temperatures will drop at some point to the -8°C to -10°C required to harvest frozen yet pressable berries. The early winter of 2013 has provided one of Ontario's best-ever icewine harvests (around 7,000 tonnes of frozen grapes). Most are made from the hybrid Vidal, whose wines are generous, plump and sweetly attractive, a cross between tarte tatin and fudge sundae. But the most concentrated, nuanced, vital and intriguing icewines, here as in Germany, are from Riesling.

What surprised me, though, were Ontario's dry wines, harvested before the frosts. The most consistent performer, in my opinion, is again Riesling: the variety copes as well as any with the humid Niagara summers, and is winter-hardy, too – vital in Ontario, where winter kill is a constant threat. 'All the people round here who said they'd never grow Riesling,' claimed Tom Pennachetti of Cave Spring, 'are now beginning to plant it.' The Cave Spring Rieslings are outstanding: intricate, concentrated, detailed, expressive and limpid. Like all of Ontario's best wines, they seem to occupy a kind of 'middle earth' position between Old and New Worlds: a little fuller in structure and more sub-tropical in their fruit repertoire than most German classics, yet more graceful, subtle and quietly expressive than Rieslings from the Clare or Eden Valleys.

Harald Thiel of Hidden Bench ran a successful electrical business with his brother before a life-changing

What I've been drinking this month

White Cahors doesn't exist, but there is a new IGP called Côtes du Lot, for white wines made in and around this great terroir. There's little consensus about grape varieties yet, but Alain-Dominique Perrin of Lagrézette is backing Viognier for his limestone vineyards grown near the medieval cliff-edge village of Rocamadour. Over the last month I've drunk both **Mas de Merveilles 2012** (nougat and candied almond) and **White Vision 2012** (honeysuckle and buttered lemon) – the pure Viognier version of his top cuvée, Le Pigeonnier. The latter, in particular, is classy and refined; both will deepen as the vines age.

experience. 'I was skiing with a friend in Austria when he had cardiac arrest. I gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation for 17 minutes before help arrived. I said to myself during that time that if he made it through, I was going to do what I really wanted to do with my life after that. To make wine.' The friend survived; Thiel switched careers.

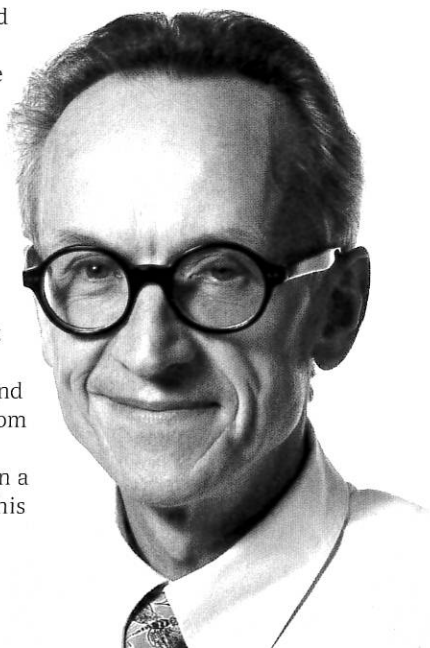
'I looked all over, and then I tasted the 1998 Temkin-Paskus Chardonnay. That was the most Burgundian Chardonnay I had ever drunk outside Burgundy. Now we own the Rosomel vineyard, where it came from.' The best Chardonnays from Niagara might indeed sow confusion in a blind tasting of Côte de Beaune whites: the fruit has similar restraint, while vinosity and a delicate creaminess help fill out the middle palate.

Mushroom and white peach are obvious analogies, but their graininess and softness remind me of moist sand at the sea's edge, too; a closing, pinched dryness and occasionally exaggerated oakiness are the biggest hazards (though not at this domain).

In addition to Hidden Bench, look out for Thomas Bachelder's effortlessly classy Chardonnays (the result of huge efforts on the part of this endearingly crazy, terroir-obsessed Québécois who also contrives to make wine in Oregon and Burgundy during what must be a couple of breakneck months every autumn), as well as those of Le Clos Jordanne, Tawse and Southbrook.

Prince Edward County is a second Ontarian peninsula, protruding into the north of Lake Ontario this time; its limestone soils have aroused much interest (Niagara's soils are mainly clay-rich glacial tills). 'The County' is even cooler than Niagara, though, and I found Chardonnays from there challengingly austere. Good sparkling wine base? Perhaps: sparkling wines are another surprise strength from Ontario (look out for the beautifully packaged Cuvée Catherine from Henry of Pelham).

And reds? Logically, you'd think Pinot – and Niagara does have fine-contoured, elegant examples from most of the producers named above, as well as Pearl Morissette, Malivoire and others. Yet everywhere I went, those in the know kept tipping Cabernet Franc for the future. 'I didn't want to make Cabernet Franc,' admitted François Morissette, 'yet I have to admit it has tremendous potential here.' I tasted impressively ripe, vivacious and textured Cabernet Franc from, once again, many of the names I've cited, as well as 13th Street and Ravine. Gamay and Merlot can be good in Niagara, too, but for a cold winter night (no shortage of those) Franc looks the surprise best bet. **D**



Andrew Jefford is a *Decanter* contributing editor. Read his 'Jefford on Monday' blog on www.decanter.com/jefford