

The world's best wine magazine

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Decanter

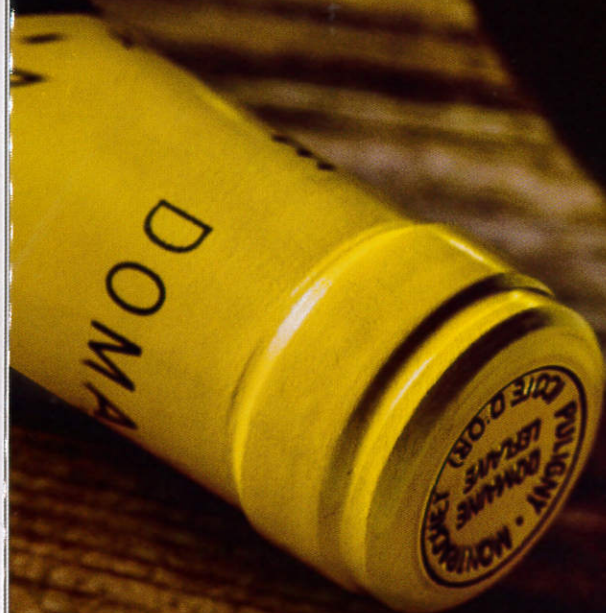
BURGUNDY 2014

The insider's guide to the new vintage:
from north to south, reds and whites

**California's top
2012 Cabernets**

169 wines tasted
and rated

**Château Latour's
Frédéric Engerer**



ALSO • Why January needn't be dry • Europe's top co-ops
• Niagara travel guide • *Decanter* Restaurants of the Year





The *Decanter* travel guide to

Niagara Peninsula, Canada

FACT FILE

Planted area 5,500ha

Production 175,000hl
of VQA wine in 2014

Properties 84

Main grapes

Red Pinot Noir,
Cabernet Franc, Merlot,
Cabernet Sauvignon,
Syrah, Gamay Noir

White Riesling,
Chardonnay, Sauvignon
Blanc, Pinot Gris,
Gewurztraminer, Vidal
Blanc

Further information

www.vqaontario.ca

Perfect for a winter getaway, this scenic region within easy reach of Toronto offers friendly welcomes and impressive wines, says Julian Hitner

FOR THE QUINTESSENTIAL Canadian wine experience, the annual Niagara Icewine Festival (www.niagaraicewinefestival.com) is in a league of its own. Held over three weeks every January, this most frigid of fêtes is the perfect starting point for exploring the Niagara Peninsula, currently one of the world's hottest cool-climate regions.

Nestled between Lake Ontario to the north, Lake Erie to the south (the 228m Niagara Escarpment in between) and the bucolic yet commanding Niagara River to the east, the peninsula has for more than 20 years been

celebrated for its icewine. The best versions are crafted from Riesling, with less expensive examples fashioned from the white hybrid Vidal Blanc. Indeed, there is nothing more Canadian than bundling up in one's warmest garments, possibly for temperatures reaching as low as -20°C, and sipping these world-class dessert wines at the height of the snow season.

Each weekend during the festival, the main street of Niagara-on-the-Lake – one of southern Ontario's most quaintly picturesque 19th-century towns – is transformed into a wondrous outdoor wine tasting. The frozen temperatures, snow drifts and occasional icy tumble onto the ground are integral parts of the experience. With plenty of hot drink stations and indoor cafés, delicious local foods and magnificent ice sculptures, there is something joyous about judiciously downing Niagara's sweetest elixirs and braving the elements all at once.



'Most wineries in Niagara are eagerly, and graciously, open to visitors throughout the year'

Above: even in the depths of winter, during icewine harvest, Niagara's wineries welcome visitors

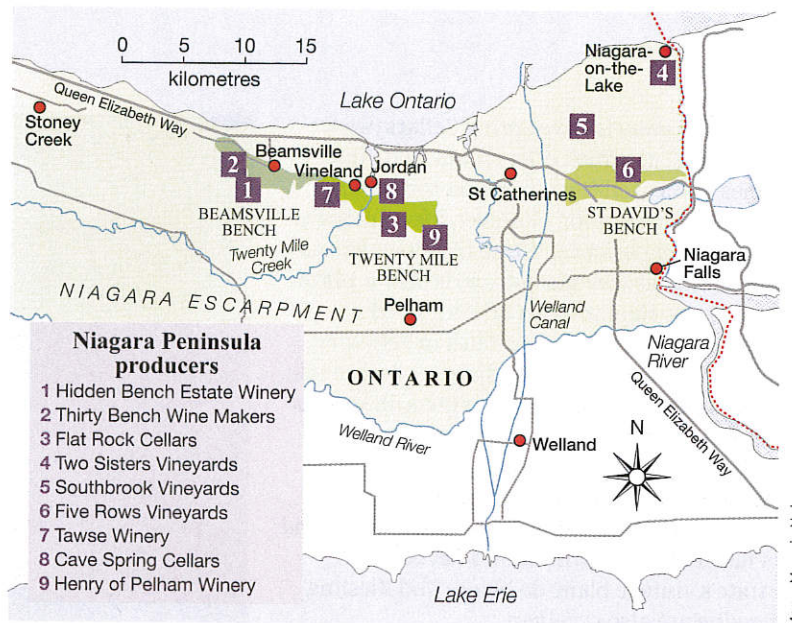
Beyond icewine

Yet in recent years, icewine has taken a back seat to the extraordinary progress that local producers have made with their dry reds, whites and sparkling wines. For many, Riesling, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are the region's future, the finest garnering global attention – including at the Decanter World Wine Awards.

In general, the best examples come from the Niagara Escarpment, particularly Beamsville Bench and Twenty Mile Bench, a 35-minute drive from Niagara-on-the-Lake. An unhurried visit at Hidden Bench (www.hiddenbench.com) is a must – its owner Harald Thiel is ferociously committed to producing the greatest possible artisanal Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Riesling (plus several fine Bordeaux blends). Less than 10km down the road is Tawse Winery (www.tawsewinery.ca), home to some of the greatest Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc (a minor specialty) in the region.

Most wineries in Niagara are eagerly, and graciously, open to visitors throughout the year, though tours should always be booked in advance. Tasting fees are usually waived if a bottle is purchased. ➤

Photograph: SuperStock/Alamy Stock Photo



- Niagara Peninsula producers**
- 1 Hidden Bench Estate Winery
 - 2 Thirty Bench Wine Makers
 - 3 Flat Rock Cellars
 - 4 Two Sisters Vineyards
 - 5 Southbrook Vineyards
 - 6 Five Rows Vineyards
 - 7 Tawse Winery
 - 8 Cave Spring Cellars
 - 9 Henry of Pelham Winery

Maps: Maggie Nelson

My perfect day in Niagara

Morning

At the intimate Harbour House hotel* in Niagara-on-the-Lake, one of Ontario's prettiest little towns, wake up to a luxurious breakfast of freshly made scones, seasonal egg dishes and excellent cappuccino. After a stroll around nearby Paradise Grove Park, head to Hidden Bench (*see main text, left*). With luck, owner Harald Thiel will be on hand to pour his wines, which are arguably among the finest in Niagara, if not all of Ontario. Next door is Thirty Bench (www.thirtybench.com), highly regarded for its single-vineyard Rieslings and icewine. Views throughout these pastoral parts of the Niagara Escarpment are superb, especially around Pinot Noir producer Flat Rock Cellars (www.flatrockcellars.com).

Afternoon

For formal lunching, Inn on the Twenty* is outstanding, while next door is a wonderful Inuit arts shop (www.artnunavik.ca). Alternatively, a visit to White Meadows Farms* provides a definitive Canadian experience. However, a 30km detour to Kitchen 76 Restaurant at Two Sisters Vineyards* for its exquisite casual fare near the Niagara River is well worth the journey. Though only open on weekends, biodynamic producer Southbrook (*see main text overleaf*)

is also ideal for lunch and to try its incredibly unique Chardonnays.

Evening and overnight

After an afternoon appointment at Five Rows Craft Wine (*see main text overleaf*) and an addictive slice of pie and a hot drink at The Pie Plate Bakery and Café* nearby, a leisurely stroll around Niagara-on-the-Lake (possibly including a stop at Fort George) is always a winner. Or for a bit of culture, buy tickets to a play at the renowned Shaw Festival held every spring through to autumn. For a memorable dinner, Treadwell Cuisine* at 124 on Queen Hotel and Spa (www.124queen.com) is one of the most luxurious institutions on the peninsula. Between all this, a visit to Niagara Falls, plus the icewine festival if travelling in January, is a must – cosy garments and all.

For more details on places marked with an asterisk (), turn to p98*



Fine dining at Inn on the Twenty

Not far away is Cave Spring Cellars (www.cavespring.ca), which offers many of its fine wines at the well-known Inn on the Twenty restaurant next door. However, for a uniquely Canadian experience, White Meadows Farms (www.whitemeadowsfarms.com) is only a 15km drive away. Here you can take a guided weekend tour of the sugar bush in February, March, July and August to discover how maple syrup is made – and of course taste all sorts of maple products, with or without pancakes.

Less than 3km to the north is Henry of Pelham (www.henryofpelham.com), a pioneer winery and producer of Baco Noir, a red hybrid of fascinating chewiness and flavour. The estate's vintage blanc de blancs and Riesling icewine are also excellent.

Like most other wine regions, local growers here are increasingly embracing organic and biodynamic viticulture. Presently, the only fully biodynamic winery is Southbrook (www.southbrook.com), located on Niagara Stone Road off the Queen Elizabeth Way. While the Chardonnays show great sense of place, the Poetica red Bordeaux blend is a showstopper.

Year-round attractions

The annual International Cool-Climate Chardonnay Celebration has become a fixture in Niagara every July, with producers from all over the world descending on the peninsula for a weekend of events. Without question, Burgundian-type Chardonnay has made significant headway in the region over the past several years. With warmer and greener settings for outdoor dining, some may prefer this time of year to visit than January.

In large part, Niagara's greatest wine estates are in private hands. Of these, owner-winemaker Wesley David Lowrey of Five Rows Craft Wine (www.fiverows.com) is one of the most unassuming and quality-obsessive. He produces just five wines at the moment, all sourced from St David's Bench (the warmest area in Niagara) and made in tiny quantities. Visits are by appointment only. The Riesling and Shiraz are inspirational.

For those wanting a detour from the wine route, many of Niagara's most charming historical sites are based in and around Niagara-on-the-Lake, stretching along the Niagara River, one of the loveliest driving routes in the region.

Of particular interest is the brilliantly preserved Fort George, which served as the British Army's headquarters during the War of 1812. During this period, Laura Secord, Canada's most famous heroine, travelled a perilous 32km to warn the British of a surprise American attack. A visit to her homestead near Queenston Heights Park is a great way of



celebrating her courage, before heading to Niagara Falls – beautifully covered in icicles in January – just a 15-minute drive away, then warming up over a late dinner at one of Niagara-on-the-Lake's many fine restaurants.

When visiting the Niagara Peninsula, wine lovers will find two things in common. The first is astonishment at the quality on offer – sweet, dry and sparkling. The other is an extremely friendly welcome from whoever is pouring the wines. Despite the freezing conditions if journeying in winter, there is no better way of appreciating Niagara's warmth and new winegrowing status. **D**

Julian Hitner is a Toronto-based wine historian, critic and consultant >

Top: winter wonderland at Niagara Falls

Above left: Southbrook Winery is the first in the Niagara Peninsula to be certified biodynamic

Above right: vineyards at Five Rows Craft Wine

Your Niagara address book



Harbour House

Hotels

Harbour House, Niagara-on-the-Lake

Just two blocks from the Niagara River, this is an opulent yet idyllic hotel. The Conservatory's breakfast is unrivalled, boasting the finest local produce. Small wine tastings are held every afternoon. www.niagarasfinest.com

Hilton Garden Inn, Niagara-on-the-Lake

Located right off the main highway, a comfortable and reliable address for the budget-minded. Ideal for travellers with children. www.hiltongardeninn.com

Inn on the Twenty, Jordan

Not far from some of the finest estates on the Niagara Escarpment, with a great restaurant and an enviable reputation, it's a good alternative base to Niagara-on-the-Lake. Next door is Cave Spring Cellars, one of the older wineries on the peninsula; the fizz and top dry whites are superb. www.innonthetwenty.com

Prince of Wales, Niagara-on-the-Lake

Marvellous Victorian-era hotel located in the heart of Niagara-on-the-Lake. A favourite spot for traditional afternoon tea. www.vintage-hotels.com



Prince of Wales

Restaurants

Il Gelato di Carlotta, Niagara-on-the-Lake

Wondrous cakes, pastries and ice cream. No visit to Niagara-on-the-Lake would be complete without a visit to this phenomenal dessert emporium. www.gelatodicarlotta.com

Kitchen 76 at Two Sisters Vineyards, Niagara-on-the-Lake

Top-notch destination for lunch, offering locally grown produce in delightful surroundings. Reservations are advisable, particularly during summer. www.twosistersvineyards.com

Peller Estates Winery Restaurant, Niagara-on-the-Lake

Elegant dining establishment near the Niagara River. The sparkling wines contain just a dollop of icewine; try with chicken liver parfait. An ideal place for lunch or dinner, though reservations for the latter are advisable. www.peller.com



Peller Estates Winery

The Pie Plate Bakery and Café, Virgil

Near Niagara-on-the-Lake, this little eatery uses only locally grown fruits, preparing all pies from scratch. Homemade preserves and other treats are also for sale. The perfect afternoon stop. www.thepieplate.com

Treadwell Farm to Table, Niagara-on-the-Lake

Upscale casual dining, featuring seasonal, regional ingredients. An institution since opening in 2006. Reservations are highly recommended. www.treadwellcuisine.com

White Meadows Farms, Pelham

The best flapjacks and maple syrup in the region, great for breakfast or as an afternoon snack. A true Canadian experience, with plenty of maple syrup bottles and other goods to bring back home. Held every weekend in February and March, the winter Sugar Bush Adventure is a great tour for learning all about maple syrup harvesting. www.whitemeadowsfarms.com

Shopping

Greaves Jams & Marmalades, Niagara-on-the-Lake

Exceptional producer and purveyor of jams and marmalades, all of which are made using exclusively local produce, thanks to one of the most hospitable fruit-growing climates in the country. www.greavesjams.com

Ninavik Native Arts, Jordan

Splendid Inuit arts museum and shop, offering a beautiful array of crafts from one Canada's most identifiable and artistically inclined First Nations peoples. www.artnunavik.ca

Shaw Festival Theatre Shop, Niagara-on-the-Lake

Open all year round, this boutique offers a lovely array of gift items, from locally crafted creations to beautifully designed books and scripts. Aside from wine, the Shaw Festival is one of Niagara's signature attractions, though no performances are held during the winter months. www.shawfest.com/shop

How to get there ✈

Fly into Toronto and then it's a 120km drive to Niagara-on-the-Lake. A few days in Canada's largest city is also a great way to begin or end a visit to the wineries. For extra purchases, the Summerhill LCBO (10 Scrivener Square) is one of the largest, most beautiful wine shops in Canada, based in an old railway station.