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Canada can



There's more to the Great White North than icewine, says Canadian-born Ian D'Agata. Here he urges readers to seek out the wines, and charts progress in the two key wine provinces, at opposite ends of the country

CANADA IS ON the verge of breaking out big time on the world wine map. During my adolescent years in Toronto, learning both English and French as per the wishes of my Italian parents, I fell in love with the country's diverse and delicious bottlings.

It's a love affair that continues, stronger than ever, to this day: I'm still enthralled by what are some of the world's best, if least known, Rieslings, Chardonnays, Pinot Noirs and Cabernet Francs, and champion their merits any chance I have. Once known only for its sweet icewines, it's the country's dry wines that are now turning heads.

What I find thrilling is just how much they have improved in a very short period of time. Early efforts were often beyond rustic, and I remember being laughed out of rooms in Italy back in the early '80s when presenting Ontario Merlots or late-harvest Rieslings to Italian wine snobs trained on Pomerol and Mosel. But the potential for greatness was obvious (at least, to those willing to see it), and my faith never wavered. Over the years, the laughter died away. Whereas Italy's leading wine magazine had haughtily refused an article on Canadian wines in 1989, it accepted one in 2001 and now they ask me to write them.

Today, much like young New World wine powers such as Oregon and New Zealand, Canada's wines – and the men and women who make them – have arrived.

Varied terroirs

Wine is made in commercially significant volumes in six of Canada's 10 provinces and three territories – Ontario, British Columbia (BC), Québec, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island – but Ontario and BC alone account for 98% of the total production.

Much of the country is too cold for *Vitis*



vinifera to grow, and this explains why the Canadian wine industry had originally bet on hybrids such as Vidal and Seyval Blanc. With time it became apparent to producers that specific natural barriers and formations create microclimates ideally suited for cultivation of *vinifera* vines.

In this respect climate change has also helped, though Canadian winters can still be extremely harsh. In Québec, for example, 'hilling up' the vines each winter (vines are pruned down and buried under the snow) is unavoidable. Even next door, in marginally warmer Ontario, most producers are abandoning Merlot because it often fails to survive frequent long and cold wintry spells.

To date, only Ontario and BC have established appellation systems (Designated Viticultural Areas), based on those of France and Italy. However, these two provinces make very different wines. Geology, topography, wind currents and the presence of lakes all play a role in helping explain not just why wines can be made in Canada, but great,

Above: the winery and vineyards of Burrowing Owl Estate in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley, the province's premier wine region

*'The most influential factor
on wine quality is the
proximity of the vineyards
to Lake Ontario'*



uniquely site-specific ones at that, along with which grape varieties are planted where.

Ontario's cooler average temperatures and uniquely complex geology are heaven for cool-climate varieties such as Riesling, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. By contrast, British Columbia is renowned for outstanding Syrah, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, as these reach optimal ripeness levels in BC's generally warmer growing seasons.

It shouldn't come as a big surprise that Canadian producers are increasing production of sparkling wines. These are not the focus here. Though impressive and tasty, most still lack the complexity and depth of the best from Champagne or Franciacorta.

In the east

Ontario's viticultural areas are all around Lake Ontario and Lake Erie and were developed along horizontal lines running parallel to the water. The quality of Ontario's wines is the result of three factors: the presence of the lake, topography and soil composition.

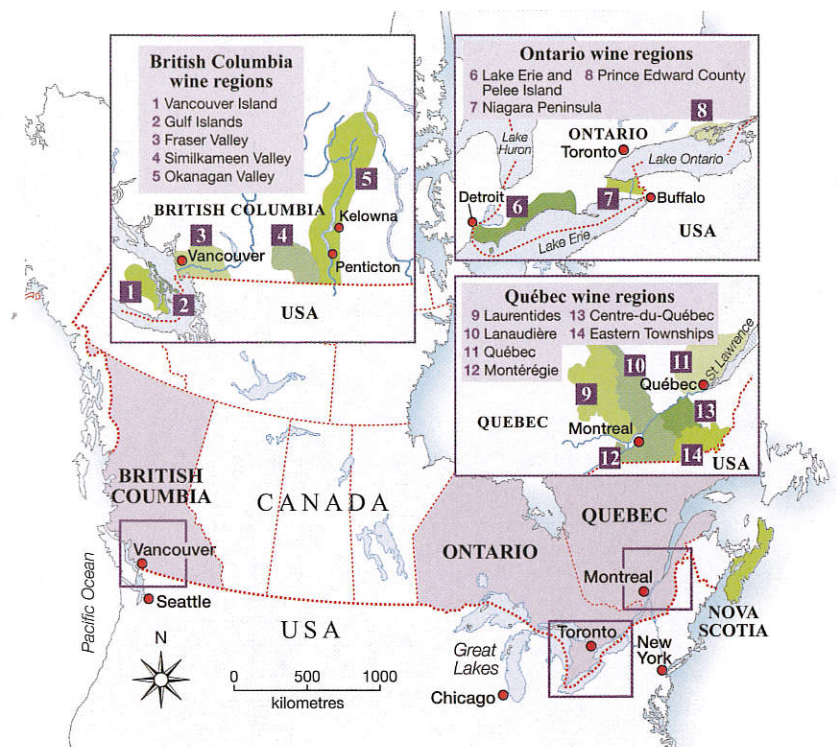
The most influential factor is the vineyards' proximity to Lake Ontario. One of the coldest and deepest of the Great Lakes, it retains heat in the daytime and releases it to the vines at night, creating a grape-friendly habitat. Microclimates change greatly within short distances from shores: budbreak occurs latest in vineyards next to the lake (even in early June) and the growing season is short. >

Above: Toronto's CN Tower and the Rogers Centre stadium are visible from Flat Rock Cellars' vineyards in the Twenty Mile Bench sub-appellation of the Niagara Peninsula DVA, just 7km from the shores of Lake Ontario

With increasing distance from the water, the lake's moderating effect is diminished. Hence, the Beamsville Bench sub-appellation, roughly 3km from the lake, is known for wines of bright acidity; those of the Twenty Mile Bench, about 7km from the lake (where there is a longer growing season) have riper and more tropical fruit aromas and flavours; and those of the St David's Bench (10km from the lake, so the growing season starts even earlier) are known for a much riper style.

Topography is also important in Niagara, where vineyards are located mainly between the lake shore and the famous Escarpment (a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve) – a ridge rising behind the vines and protecting them from the cold northerly winds. Thanks to ridges and troughs present between lake and escarpment, with vines planted on both, topographical nooks and crannies are created allowing airflow and circulation patterns that reduce the risk of spring frost.

This situation is especially true of the Niagara Peninsula, one of Ontario's three DVAs. The other two, Prince Edward County (also located next to Lake Ontario) and Lake Erie North Shore (which hugs Lake Erie, a much shallower lake that often freezes over in winter) have less topographical diversity and consequently the beneficial effects of thermal regulation and air circulation flows are lost. In fact, up to 80% of North Shore vinifera vines



'Many producers are betting Prince Edward County will produce Canada's best Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, if it isn't already'

Canada: know your vintages

Ontario

2013 Cool temperatures, lots of rain and cloud cover, so wines are low in alcohol. As it was so cold in winter, it was a very good, early icewine harvest.

2012 Great for Riesling, very good for Pinot Noir. Grapes for sparkling wine production were picked in August – the earliest ever. A poor icewine vintage; some producers were still waiting for the grapes to freeze in March!

2011 Average at best, with too much rain; especially difficult for the two Cabernets; much better for the Pinot varieties, especially Pinot Noir; a year saved by the Indian summer, giving lots of elegance, power and complexity.

2010 Slow, even ripening gave high-quality wines with very good ageing potential.

2009 The worst vintage in 15 years; rainy and cool.

British Columbia

2013 An outstanding summer led to a bumper crop and the earliest harvest on record. Very good whites and reds, excellent icewines.

2012 A very productive, warm vintage best for whites and icewine.

2011 A cool spring (delayed budbreak and flowering) and one of the coolest summers on record threatened a disaster, but warm summer weather saved the vintage.

2010 A cold and wet spring and a cooler than normal summer made for a challenging vintage.

2009 Late bud break but a dry, warm summer and a fine autumn season allowed for an early harvest of balanced, well-structured wines.

died during the icy 2013 winter. Much like in Québec, many producers in Prince Edward County (essentially a peninsula jutting into a shallow part of Lake Ontario) and Lake Erie North Shore also resort to hillying up the vines before the start of winter.

The Niagara region is characterised by highly complex soils, mainly deposits of tough Dolomitic limestone, various clays, shale and sandstones, the last two often compressed into a fine glacial till. Prince Edward County is blessed with soils especially rich in limestone (there is a noteworthy presence of limestone in Niagara too, but mostly of a different geologic origin) – one of the reasons many producers are betting Prince Edward County will produce Canada's best Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, if it isn't already.

Ontario: stylistic refinement

A telltale sign of just how much Ontario's wine scene has progressed over the past 20 years is that icewine is no longer made by many of the province's wineries, though Canada remains the world's largest producer of icewine (most of which is made in Ontario).

There are fewer places in the world making better Pinot Noirs, Chardonnays and Rieslings.



Above: Charles Baker is one of Ontario's top garagiste Riesling producers

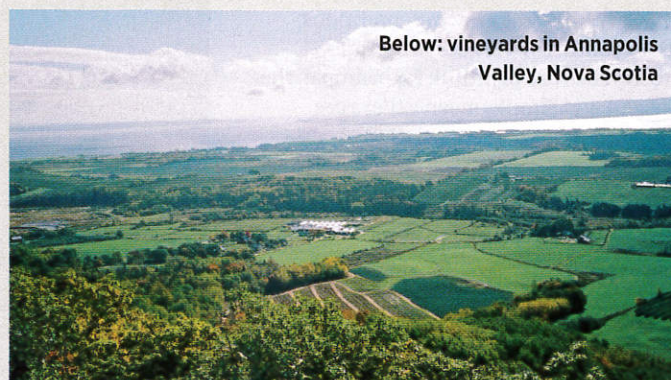
Personally, I find many New (and Old) World Chardonnays unbearable, with exaggerated tropical fruit and caramel aromas and flavours that are anathema to any food, but Ontario's climate doesn't allow the grapes to reach huge ripeness levels. Winemakers aim for stylistic refinement, and the majority of Ontario's Chardonnays are mineral, high in acid and full of bright, orchard fruit flavours. They fall neatly in between those of Burgundy and those from California or Australia.

Ontario Rieslings also mirror elements of German and Australian Rieslings. They are characterised by the former's lively acidities, orchard fruit and mineral aromas and flavours (without quite the racy juiciness) and the latter's fuller bodied style (but never quite as dry and rich). Petrol notes develop only slowly over time, mainly in warmer zones such as the St David's Bench. Apart from icewines, most Ontario Rieslings are dry: noble rot is rare here, and humidity is such that few producers wish to risk their crops for late-harvest wines.

An interesting development has been that of the garagistes, small-volume producers who have identified specific high-quality Riesling vineyards and bottle their wines using other wineries' facilities. The best-known garagiste is Charles Baker, who has created his own line of Rieslings from the Picone and Ivan vineyards while remaining sales and marketing director of Stratus winery.

More than with any other variety, it is Pinot Noir that showcases Ontario's uniqueness: the wines embody the best of Burgundy, Oregon and New Zealand. You'll be hard pressed to find jammy or overripe Pinots from Ontario, where the vast majority display pristine red cherry and berry aromas and flavours, aromatic herb and mineral nuances and naturally high acidity. My only caveat is that vines are still relatively young (few are over 20 years old) and wines can be angular and tough, and marred by a touch too much oak for the fruit. However, the purity and archetypal Burgundian aromas and flavours (think Savigny or Volnay) are impressive.

Canada's wine provinces: fact file



Below: vineyards in Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia

British Columbia

About 52% of BC is planted to red grapes and 48% to whites; the most common are: Merlot (730ha), Cabernet Sauvignon (343ha), Syrah (248ha) Cabernet Franc (233ha); Pinot Gris (484ha), Chardonnay (436ha), Gewurztraminer (322ha), Riesling (200ha), Sauvignon Blanc (178ha) and Pinot Blanc (120ha). The DVAs are: Okanagan Valley, Similkameen Valley (both in the south central part of the province close to the Washington State border), Fraser Valley, Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands (all of which are part of BC's Pacific Coast). Okanagan Valley has about 130 wineries, with Vancouver Island the next most populated DVA with 35.

Ontario

Niagara Peninsula (with 10 sub-appellations and two regional appellations), Lake Erie North Shore and Prince Edward County are the three DVAs. Chardonnay (780ha), Riesling (667ha) and Cabernet Franc (580ha) are the most-planted varieties, accounting

for 18%, 14% and 11% respectively of volume VQA wine produced in the province (Pinot Noir only 5%).

Québec

Roughly 90% of the wine produced in Québec is white, mainly from the Seyval Blanc hybrid, an underrated variety which gives dainty wines. The five DVAs recognised thus far are Montérégie, Eastern Townships, Laurentian Wineries Area, Lower Laurentian Wineries and Québec City, but the wine characteristics of each are not clear yet.

Nova Scotia

The four main wine-producing areas are Annapolis Valley (the longest established and most famous), Malagash Peninsula, La Have River Valley and Bear River Valley. The time between the last spring frost and the first fall frost is much shorter than in either Ontario or BC, and the daily average temperatures are also much lower. Nova Scotia does especially well with white grape varieties, though the plantings of red grapes are more common.

Out west

In British Columbia, many viticultural areas spread out vertically, featuring very cold, practically alpine environments next to extremely hot and dry, desert-like habitats where irrigation is a must.

This places BC in a unique situation as far as Canadian wine goes, for it produces outstanding wines from both warmer- and cooler-climate varieties. For example, the ➤

Okanagan Valley, BC's premier grape-growing and wine-production area, stretches over 250km and across distinct sub-regions, each with wildly different growing conditions, north to south. Differences in soil and microclimates are plentiful: for example, the Okanagan and Similkameen valleys are characterised mostly by glaciofluvial and fluvial terraces (benches), glacial lake deposits, and slope deposit complexes.

Vancouver Island is home to many wineries, though the wet and humid western side can be especially challenging for vines (consequently, most of the wineries are located in the east). It's not uncommon to see sheets of grey plastic draped over the rows of vines in an inverted V shape creating a greenhouse effect, designed to harness heat and accelerate growth in what is an essentially short growing season.

BC is now recognised as an outstanding source of noteworthy big, bold red wines – mainly blends – made from Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, undoubtedly Canada's best. Cabernet Franc is especially promising in



Photograph: Andrea Johnson Photography

BC, much as it is in Ontario. While some of these wines show aromatic leafy and herbal qualities reminiscent of the Loire, most bear closer resemblance to the best of St-Emilion and Bolgheri. Perfumed aromas of strawberry, violet, cocoa and white pepper, with supple

Above: Tom Bachelder, 'one of Canada's most talented wine people' says Ian D'Agata

15 of the best: D'Agata's taste of Canada



Closson Chase, Closson Chase Vineyard Chardonnay, Prince Edward County, Ontario 2013

18.25/20 (94/100)

N/A UK www.clossonchase.com

A simply spectacular, precise and mineral Chardonnay not unlike a great Chevalier-Montrachet or a Kistler from California. A laser beam of acidity lifts rich tropical and citrus fruit aromas and flavours. Very rich but neither heavy nor over the top. Viticulturist/winemaker Deborah Paskus is a genius.

Drink 2015-2019 **Alcohol** 13.5%

Bachelder, Wismer Vineyard Chardonnay, Twenty Mile Bench, Niagara Peninsula, Ontario 2010

17.75 (92)

£46.99 **Corking Wines, Eclectic Tastes,**

Hawkshead Wines, Miles Better Wines, Mill Hill

Wines, Slurp, Vin Cognito

Tom Bachelder is one of the most talented wine people in Canada, and makes outstanding Chardonnay and Pinot Noir wines in Oregon, Burgundy and Niagara. The Wismer is a grand-cru-quality vineyard that offers a very rich, ripe version of Chardonnay, with buttery and

leesy notes complementing rich citrus fruit notes. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 13.5%

Cave Spring Cellars, CSV Riesling, Beamsville Bench, Niagara Peninsula, Ontario 2009

17.5 (91)

N/A UK www.cavespring.ca

There's probably no better estate than this in all of Canada, given its long track record for excellence, the large number of wines made and its willingness to innovate. The CSV is a benchmark Canadian Riesling which embodies the richer, riper but very mineral, peachy style typical of the Beamsville Bench.

Drink 2015-2022 **Alc** 13.5%



Pearl Morrisette, Cuvée Black Ball Riesling, Twenty Mile Bench, Ontario 2012

16.5 (88)

£25 **Field & Fawcett, Handford**

A cult wine producer in Canada, engaged in minimal-intervention winemaking (I find there is huge bottle variation, with some wines marked by off odours). This one, though, is just fine – full of minerals, jasmine, honeyed nuts and citrus aromas and flavours, all clean and precise.

Drink 2015-2019 **Alc** 13%

Norman Hardie Winery and Vineyard, County Unfiltered Pinot Noir, Prince Edward County, Ontario 2012

17.5 (91)

N/A UK www.normanhardie.com

Perfumed, flinty notes of bright, fresh red cherry and ripe raspberry. A chalky, saline finish adds to the elegance. Outstanding Pinot.

Drink 2015-2019 **Alc** 13.5%



Burrowing Owl Estate Winery, Cabernet Franc, Okanagan Valley, British Columbia 2010

17.25 (90+)

N/A UK www.bovwine.ca

Big bold Cab with plenty of cocoa, cedar and blackberry notes. Brooding and powerful, it needs plenty of cellaring.

Decant at least two hours ahead should you decide to open a bottle soon.

Drink 2018-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

Flat Rock Cellars, Gravity Pinot Noir, Twenty Mile Bench, Niagara Peninsula, Ontario 2010

17.25 (90+)

N/A UK www.flatrockcellars.com

Lovely flinty and red cherry notes perked up by sweet spices, minerals and savoury root beer notes. There's lovely purity to the classic Pinot aromas and flavours.

Drink 2015-2019 **Alc** 13.5%

tannins and rich fruit flavours are hallmarks of these wines, while green bell pepper and other vegetal notes are rare. BC's white wines are fresh and lively, and Chardonnay, Riesling and Pinot Gris all perform very well.

In a sign of just how seriously wine production is viewed in across the country today, a provincial government-funded trial – the Duncan Project – assessed about 100 different varieties for planting in the Vancouver Island DVA alone between 1983 and 1990, identifying Pinot Gris, Auxerrois and Ortega as promising varieties for that specific seaside habitat.

Up and coming

Things are moving quickly in Canada's wine scene, and there are ever-increasing new wine estates appearing, many outside established production zones.

Currently, areas such as Ontario's Northumberland Hills and the Morain Oak Ridge area are attracting attention. Even the decidedly freezing Southern Georgian Bay area

of Lake Huron, where I spent my adolescence fishing away the weekends, is today home to a dozen wineries. Still too cold for vinifera varieties to thrive, it is currently planted mainly to winter-hardy hybrids such as Vidal and Marechal Foch.

In BC, as recently as 15 to 20 years ago, you couldn't have found wines from VQAs such as Fraser Valley or the Gulf Islands; wines from Lillooet, Thompson-Nicola or Shuswap are even harder to come by, but are now no longer uncommon.

Canada, while still a young wine-producing nation, is now successfully proving it belongs among the big leagues – and not just for its incredible icewines. Hopefully more of its better still reds and whites, and the sparklings, will soon be more widely exported to other countries so wine lovers everywhere will be able to taste this progress for themselves. **D**

Canadian-born Italian Ian D'Agata is an awarded wine writer and author who covers Canada, among other regions, for the online journal Vinous



Hidden Bench, Felseck Vineyard Pinot Noir, Beamsville Bench, Niagara Peninsula, Ontario 2010

17 (90)
N/A UK www.hiddenbench.com
Smoky herb and cocoa notes complement high-acid, red berries. Has a tactile presence and toasty oak sheen. Owner Harold Thiel loves big, oaked reds but his always maintain grace and freshness. **Drink** 2016-2020 **Alc** 13.5%

Malivoire, Small Lot M2 Gamay, Ontario 2011 17 (90)

N/A UK www.malivoire.com
Bright, brambly, red berry fruit and sweet spice: real freshness and lift. Lovely wine; hard to put down. **Drink** 2015-2017 **Alc** 13%



Meyer Family Vineyards, Reimer Vineyard Pinot Noir, Okanagan Valley, British Columbia 2011 17 (90)

£30 Ministry of Drinks
Smoky red cherry, fresh herbs and cocoa powder on a thick palate with bright acid lift. Shows its terroir well – a trademark of this estate,

which specialises in small-batch, handcrafted, single-vineyard wines. **Drink** 2015-2019 **Alc** 13.5%

Coyote's Run Estate Winery, Red Paw Merlot, Four Mile Creek, Niagara Peninsula, Ontario 2010 16.75 (89)

N/A UK www.coyotesrunwinery.com
Bright aromas and flavours of smoked beef and blackcurrant. The red in the Red Paw refers to the red, iron-rich Trafalgar clay loam that gives this wine its fuller mouthfeel. The warmer Four Mile Creek sub-appellation allows Merlot to ripen well. **Drink** 2015-2018 **Alc** 13.5%

Pillitteri Estates Winery, Winemaker's Selection Cabernet Franc, Niagara on the Lake, Ontario 2010 16.5 (88)

£18 Wine Sensations
Tight and focused, with slightly subdued but pure strawberry and spicy cocoa aromas and flavours and lots of tannins for support. **Drink** 2016-2019 **Alc** 14%

Inniskillin, Gold Label Oak-Aged Vidal Icewine, Niagara Peninsula, Ontario 2013 17 (90)

£51.99/375ml AG Wines, Exel, Fortnum & Mason, Hawkshead Wines, Le Vignoble, Noble Green, Slurp, Woodwinters

Rich, very sweet and yet delicate thanks to acidity lifting the honeyed tropical fruit flavours. A rare example of oak-aged icewine (about four months in barrels), the Vidal fruit is taken from Inniskillin's famous Brae Burn Vineyard – one of Ontario's best. **Drink** 2015-2019 **Alc** 12%



Peller Estate, Signature Series Vidal Blanc Icewine, Niagara Peninsula, Ontario 2013 17 (90)
£30-£35/375ml Eclectic Tastes, Eton Vintners

Orange blossom, barley sugar and ripe fig. Finishes long and clean, with good acidity balancing the sweetness. Vidal needs not always be syrupy, cloying and thick. **Drink** 2015-2019 **Alc** 12%

Mission Hill Family Estate, Riesling Icewine, Okanagan Valley, British Columbia 2003 16.75 (89)

£43/375ml Hedonism
Pristine, clean and still fresh, with jasmine and lemon aromas and flavours of noteworthy persistence. A rare chance to taste a Canadian icewine with some age on it. **Drink** 2015-2018 **Alc** 12%

For full details of UK stockists, see p91