

Exploring Canada's Fertile Wine Region

Dry table wines are coming from a country better known for ice wine than pinot noirs.

By FLORENCE FABRICANT

JORDAN, ONTARIO — Wine country on the Niagara Peninsula of Ontario, Canada, may sound a little incongruous. But the area about a half-hour west of Buffalo is home to a wine region of depth, diversity and distinction.

And as delicious as the local ice wine may be, it alone does not tell the story of the region, any more than Sauternes defines Bordeaux. Finally, dry table wines are coming from a country better known for polar bears than for pinot noirs.

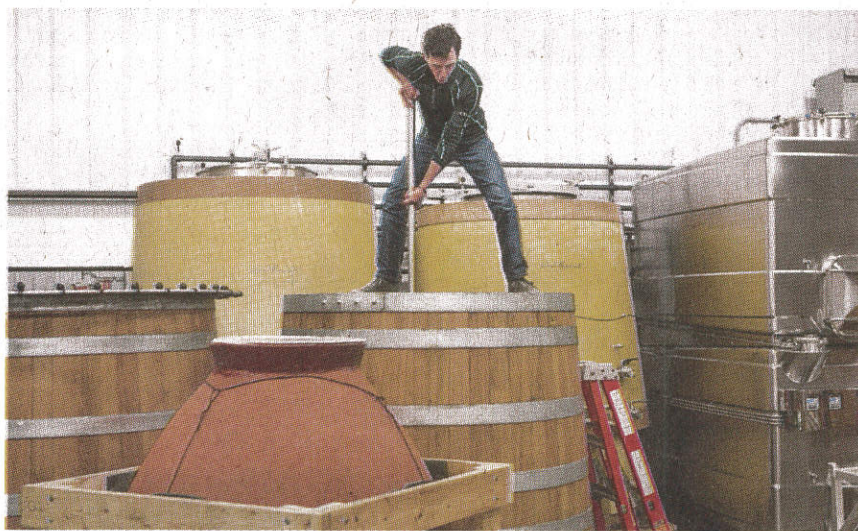
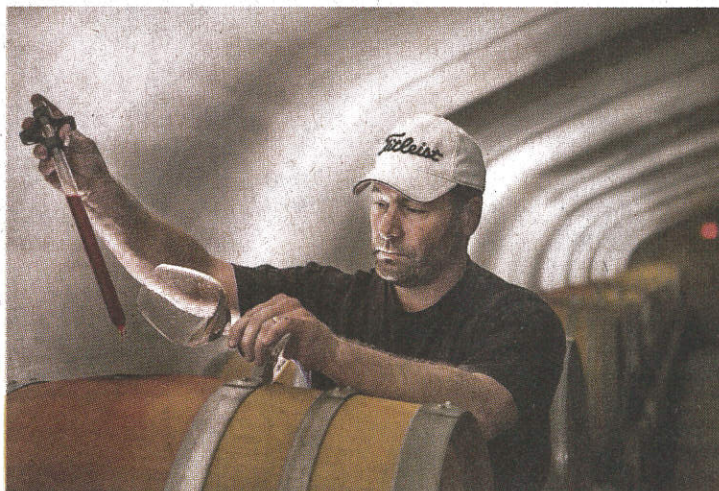
"People are very surprised when they find out you can grow grapes here," Paul Pender, the winemaker for Tawse Winery, said while pouring samples of chardonnay, pinot noir, cabernet franc and even syrah on a bright day in the fall.

Tawse is one of nearly 100 wineries dotting the region, a fertile swath that separates Lake Ontario from Lake Erie and runs roughly from the Canadian border at the Niagara River and Niagara Falls to Hamilton, Ontario, just south of Toronto.

Ontario is Canada's biggest wine-production area, most of it on the Niagara Peninsula. It considers itself a relatively new wine region, even though vines like native American *labrusca* and hybrids were planted about 150 years ago.

In 1974, the first new wine license was issued since the 1920s. In 2012, 17,000 acres of vineyards had been planted in Ontario and 86 percent were on the peninsula.

At around 43 degrees, the region is at roughly the same latitude as Northern Italy. Lake Ontario along its northern edge moderates the climate, which is similar to that of Burgundy, France. The terroir and the microclimate suit riesling, chardonnay, cabernet franc, gamay and pinot noir grapes,



Ontario is Canada's biggest wine-production area. Top, the view from Vineland Estates Winery in Vineland, Ontario. Above, Brian Schmidt, a winemaker at Vineland. Left, François Morissette, the winemaker for Pearl Morissette in Jordan, Ontario. Below, cabernet sauvignon grapes on the vine at Stratus Winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

among others.

"Americans have given a lot of attention lately to Finger Lakes wines from New York, and this is just west of there, but it's been largely ignored," said Robert Macklin, whose Artisan Wines in Norwalk, Conn., is one of the few importers.

"Part of the reason is that the best producers are very small and they were not seeking an export market," he said. "They sold a lot from the cellar door. Interest is starting to grow in the United States, but most Americans still think the idea of Canadian wine is weird."

The wines and their vineyards are worth getting to know. The Niagara Peninsula offers scores of handsome, welcoming tasting

rooms, from Old World traditional to starkly modern. Visitors will also find attractions like fine restaurants, country inns, villages, cultural events and hiking trails. Think Sonoma, but less expensive and (for the Northeast) without the jet lag.

Less than an hour southeast of Toronto, Vineland Estates Winery sits on the 20-Mile Bench of the Niagara Escarpment. The winery buildings include a 19th-century stone tower that was once part of a Mennonite homestead and overlook riesling vines that descend to a valley with a view of Lake Ontario. One of the older estates, it has been in business more than 30 years.

The winery's farmhouse restaurant offers seasonal food prepared by the executive chef, Justin Downes, including house-made charcuterie and local cheeses, which can be paired with a sleek, unoaked

chardonnay; smoky pinot noirs, and a graceful pinot meunier with a modest 12 percent alcohol.

"We have Mediterranean summers and Siberian winters, so we have to specialize in cool-climate varietals," said Allan Schmidt, who runs the winery with his brother, Brian. "But we're realizing that they're more food-friendly."

At Hidden Bench, an estate with rustic flair, the chardonnays of Harald Thiel, the owner, are restrained yet aromatic. His pinot noirs are silky, balanced and relatively low in alcohol, often less than 13 percent.

In the nearby hamlet of Jordan, there's a country inn and a restaurant owned by Cave Spring Cellars. The specialty is riesling; the wines vary from bone dry, austere and tart, to fuller-bodied and off-dry. Also in Jordan, François Morissette is the winemaker for Pearl Morissette, a no-frills winery he owns with Mel Pearl, an entrepreneur. Both share a passion for Burgundian-style wines.

In addition to supple chardonnays, Mr. Morissette is making pinot noirs that he says he's "not proud of yet," and gamay. His 2011 pinot noir still has tannic grip. It needs time. His 2013 gamay, made without sulfites, is rounder and burlier. The winery's chardonnays are complex yet mineral-driven, with well-toned, juicy acidity.

"Wine has to make you feel like eating," he said. "Here we try to do as little to the wine as possible. We could be called natural, though we're not associated with the move-

IF YOU GO

WHAT TO SEE

Tawse Winery, 3955 Cherry Avenue, Vineland, Ontario; 905-562-9500; tawsewinery.ca.

Cave Spring Cellars, 3836 Main Street, Jordan, Ontario; 905-562-3581; cavespring.ca.

Stratus Vineyards, 2059 Niagara Stone Road, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario; 905-468-1806; stratuswines.com.

Hidden Bench, 4152 Locust Lane, Beamsville, Ontario; 905-563-8700; hiddenbench.com.

Pearl Morissette, 3953 Jordan Road, Jordan, Ontario; 905-562-4376; pearlmorissette.com.

WHERE TO STAY AND EAT

Jordan House, 3751 Main Street, Jordan, Ontario; 905-562-9591; jordanhouse.ca.

Inn on the Twenty, 3845 Main Street; 905-562-5336. **Inn on the Twenty Restaurant**, 3836 Main Street, Jordan, Ontario; 905-562-7313; innonthetwenty.com.

Vineland Estates Winery Restaurant, 3620 Moyer Road, Vineland, Ontario; 888-846-3526; vineland.com.

Treadwell, 114 Queen Street, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario; 905-934-9797; treadwellcuisine.com.

ment." He's also dabbling in orange wine. Like some other wineries, Pearl Morissette depends on advanced techniques like gravity flow to fill the barrels and tanks, not pumping. Sulfites are kept to a minimum, if used at all.

Many of the wineries, especially the newer ones, also boast low environmental impact through recycling, architectural design and geothermal engineering.

From the higher escarpment section of the peninsula, about halfway between the two Great Lakes, the landscape descends toward flatter land at Lake Ontario and the climate warms.

The hub in this part of the peninsula is Niagara-on-the-Lake, a charming town with shops, restaurants and bed-and-breakfast inns surrounded by wineries. At Treadwell, a restaurant just off the main street, the wine list is a showcase for local wines.

Near the town, an imposing modern glass building that has the sleek look of a Mercedes dealership houses Stratus Vineyards. It is just 10 years old. The geometric design, in marble and light and dark wood, continues throughout.

"Here you can see the future," said Charles Baker, the head of marketing at Stratus and a winemaker on his own. "Nothing is set in stone the way it is in Europe. Creativity is possible."

The estate cultivates 18 varietals on 62 acres, and uses most of the grapes in blends (or "assemblages," as they put it) for more complexity. Warmer-climate grapes like syrah and tempranillo can ripen, as the harvest continues into November.

You can also add sparkling wines to the profile of the region. With all that chardonnay and pinot noir, they were inevitable, though sparkling rieslings are also being made. One winemaker, Martin Malivoire, has planted melon de Bourgogne, the grape used for making Muscadet.

As for the famous ice wines, grapes left on the vines late in Ontario do not develop fungus like botrytis, but simply freeze, resulting in the concentrated sweetness of natural ice wine.

Michael Madrigale, the wine director for Bould Sud and Bar Boulud, has added some Niagara Peninsula wines to his list and said he is excited about them. "I keep trying to find new things," he said. "I visited Niagara about a year ago and thought the wines had real character: Burgundian, lean and light with tight acidity, but they were fully ripe. I thought they tasted real."

Eric Asimov's wine column *The Pour* will return on Jan. 30.