

EATING & DRINKING

ON WINE: LETTIE TEAGUE



O Canada, We Raise a Toast to Thee

CANADIANS ARE FAMOUSLY conciliatory. To be a Canadian, it seems, is to know how to apologize. A lot. This temperament has its advantages (Canadians rarely go to war) but also means Canadians are often overlooked. For example, few consumers realize one of the world's most exciting new wine regions is in Ontario, Canada. That's the Canadians' fault, of course. As Ed Madronich, Jr., of Flat Rock Cellars in Ontario, told me, "Canadians aren't very good at promoting ourselves."

Mr. Madronich is one of several winemakers I met during a recent whirlwind visit to the Niagara Peninsula. He's among the region's most prominent producers of Riesling and Pinot Noir, two grapes planted more and more in this region of Ontario, along with other vinifera—that is, non-hybrid—grapes such as Chardonnay, Gamay and Cabernet Franc.

The production of grapes in the region has increased 70% in 10 years (78,000 metric tons of vinifera grapes this year versus 46,000 in 2004), and the number of wineries has more than doubled in that period, from 71 to 150.

The region, officially granted its appellation in 2000, has attracted investment by Canadians, including audiovisual magnate Harald Thiel (Hidden Bench Vineyards and Winery) and David Feldberg, president and CEO of office-furniture company Teknon (Stratus Vineyards), as well as foreigners. The Boissets, one of the biggest vintners in Burgundy, created Le Clos Jordanne in 1998, an estate dedicated to producing high-quality Chardonnay and Pinot Noir the family hopes to export to the U.S. sometime soon.

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Despite this growth, most Americans know but one Canadian wine: ice wine. A dessert wine made from grapes that have frozen on the vine, ice wine is perhaps the prototypical product of Canada for wine drinkers. But ice wine has led to a lot of misconceptions. The primary one is that Canada is pretty much frozen all the time. But as Niagara Peninsula vintners are quick to point out, their region is on a lower latitude than is Burgundy and other cool-climate regions in Europe.

In fact, the peninsula, sandwiched



Aron Vincent/Elkain for The Wall Street Journal (2); F. Martin Baum/Elkain for The Wall Street Journal (3)

between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, is just over the border from Buffalo, N.Y., and a 90-minute drive southwest of Toronto. The Niagara Peninsula appellation sits on the shore of Lake Ontario, is bordered to the east by the Niagara River and includes Niagara Falls.

The two most important appellations within the Niagara Peninsula are the Niagara Escarpment and Niagara-on-the-Lake. The former includes a comb-like ridge of hills, while the latter is flat. Many of the same grapes are grown both places, but the soils differ: sand and clay in the flat parts; limestone in the escarpment, which yields wines more linear and higher in acidity.

One of the region's great success stories is Tawse Winery, founded 12 years ago by Moray Tawse, who also has holdings in Argentina and France. It was named the top winery in Canada in 2010, 2011 and 2012 by Canadian Wine Access magazine, an impressive achievement for 46-year-old winemaker Paul Pender. Though he had a previous life as a carpenter, he has been the Tawse winemaker since 2005.

Mr. Pender has produced a number of noteworthy wines, including some terrific Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays. His 2011 Tawse Quarry Ridge Chardonnay was one of the most promising North American Chardonnays I've tasted all year. And yet Mr. Pender, looking very Canadian in a plaid shirt



the day of my visit, is modest about his accomplishments. He did express some frustration that his region was still so obscure. On a trip to New York City a few years ago, Mr. Pender met people "amazed" that grapes could be grown in Ontario at all. "I would have thought the New York market was more sophisticated than that," he said—in a tone less snarky than shocked.

Down the road from Tawse, another Canadian had a singular vision: to produce some of the best Gamay in North America. Martin Malivoire, a Hollywood special-effects man turned vintner, was a pioneer in the late '90s when he planted the grape best known as the one behind Beaujolais. Gamay is



NORTH-COUNTRY FARE Top: tasting room at Stratus Vineyards, in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Winemaker Paul Pender, of Tawse Winery, in Vineland.

now one of the fastest-growing varieties in the Niagara Peninsula region, but Mr. Malivoire met a lot of skepticism then. Most winemakers were concentrating on the more prestigious Pinot Noir, recalled Mr. Malivoire, "but Gamay makes a really delicious red wine here." Today he proudly notes Malivoire Wine is the largest bottler of Gamay in North America, producing about 4,000 cases a year, although this declaration could not be confirmed.

I liked all three Gamays by Malivoire's winemaker, Shiraz Mottiar, though the 2012 Malivoire Small Lot Gamay—a bright, snappy, crunchy red—was my favorite. The Small Lot Gamay also impressed sommelier

Michael Madrigale, of New York City's Bar Boulud and Boulud Sud, when he visited the winery, so much so that he helped Mr. Malivoire find distribution in New York. "Michael was a real catalyst," noted Mr. Malivoire, who concedes that New York City is "the gastronomic center of the world."

More steps yielded more friendly winemakers and more very good wines. At the ultramodern Stratus Vineyards, I had a terrific Cabernet Franc and a chat with Jean-Laurent Groux, from the Loire Valley, who's been making wine in Ontario for 25 years. He had yet to harvest all his grapes this year. Wasn't he worried about the snow predicted to fall in a few days? "Sometimes we don't pick until the end of November," he said with a laugh. A quarter century in Canada had certainly made this Frenchman sanguine about bad weather.

At Cave Spring Cellars, located in Jordan Village, I met brother-owners Tom and Len Pennacchetti at their restaurant. Although Cave Spring is best known for its Rieslings, which are good, I really liked their Pinot Noirs, both the Niagara Escarpment bottling and the "Dolomite." Sadly, the Dolomite, on which I was particularly keen, is not exported at this time, though the Escarpment can be found in the States.

The subject of distribution came up with almost every winemaker I met. It was the most popular topic after the weather. According to a spokesperson for the Wine Council of Ontario, exports to the U.S. have increased notably in the past 6 to 7 years, yet it is still hard to find Canadian wines here. And while a few wineries, such as Cave Spring, have exported wines for many years, most Niagara Peninsula wineries have entered the U.S. market only in the past several.

A large demand for Canadian wines exists in their own country, after all, and they can sell product at their wineries or at LCBO outlets (retail stores operated by the Liquor Control Board of Ontario). The cost of exporting is high, and the competition is fierce. On the other hand, as Mr. Pender noted, it is important to have wines in a market like New York. "In order to be accepted at home, you need to be accepted away," he said. Of course, that means Canadian winemakers might have to do something very un-Canadian: They will actually have to promote themselves.

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OENOFILE: FIVE BOTTLES FROM OUR NORTHERN NEIGHBORS THAT YOU CAN FIND IN THE STATES



2011 Tawse Quarry Road Chardonnay \$36
The crisp, mineral style of this bright and well-balanced Chardonnay recalls a high-quality village-level Chablis. In fact, a wine-merchant friend who tasted it blind in New York City pegged it as French. An impressive effort from young carpenter-turned-winemaker Paul Pender.



2012 Cave Spring Niagara Escarpment Pinot Noir \$18
Although Cave Spring is best known for their Rieslings they make quite a few their Pinot Noirs impressed me, too. Their "Dolomite" Pinot is not currently available in the U.S., but this lively red is. Marked by notes of red fruit and spice, this is an excellent example of a cool-climate Pinot at a very good price.



2012 Malivoire Wine Small Lot Gamay \$22
Proprietor Martin Malivoire was an early champion of growing Gamay in the Niagara Peninsula, and quite a few winemakers in Ontario have followed in his wake. Best known as the grape of Beaujolais, Gamay has become quite trendy. This bright, snappy red is marked by lots of crunchy red fruit—a great wine with food.



2010 Stratus Vineyards Cabernet Franc \$35
French-born winemaker J-L Groux is a bit of a legend in the Niagara Peninsula, and his long experience is evident in this truly elegant, well-polished Cabernet Franc, a grape that doesn't get much recognition in the winemaking world. Mr. Groux, however, has made it a star of the Stratus portfolio.



2011 Hidden Bench Nuit Blanche Rosomel \$42
Hidden Bench owner Harald Thiel is one of the visionaries of the Niagara Peninsula, producing an impressive lineup of vineyard-designated Rieslings, Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays. He also makes this terrific (and unusual) well-structured Sauvignon Blanc-Semillon blend that's a Canadian take on a fine white Bordeaux.