

Ontario's Cool-Climate Chardonnay • Best New Sommeliers of 2014

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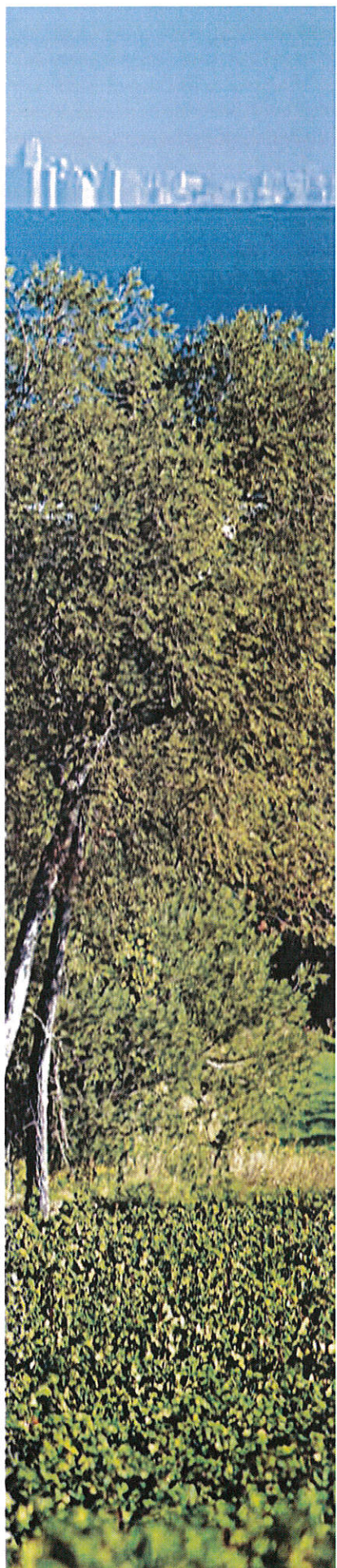
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On a clear day, Toronto's skyline is visible from the top of the vineyards at Hidden Bench.



# Ontario's Cool-Climate Chardonnay

*By John Szabo, MS*

Ontario may not yet resonate widely as a go-to name when seeking fine chardonnay, but the vineyards in the cool southern stretch of this Canadian province are quickly gaining a reputation as a source of crisp and pure, tension-filled wines.

And it's been a long time coming. Chardonnay was the first vinifera planted in Ontario in the late 1950s by Bill Lenko, who defied the warnings by the local Horticultural Research Institute that European grapes wouldn't survive. Today, chardonnay is the region's most important variety by volume, and the inspiration for an annual conference, the International Cool Climate Chardonnay Celebration.

This year, after the "i4c," I set out for the Niagara Peninsula and Prince Edward County to get a closer look.

The drive southwest from downtown Toronto to the southern shores of Lake Ontario takes about an hour on a good QEW traffic day. Near the town of Grimsby you'll catch your first glimpse of the Niagara Escarpment. This imposing, thickly forested ridge of hard dolomitic limestone rises up to 550 feet, and roughly marks the beginning of the Niagara Peninsula.

It's another 30 miles east to the other end of the peninsula, where the Niagara River draws the US border and runs from Lake Erie north over



Vineyards at Hidden Bench on the Niagara Peninsula.

“The mineral character of our chardonnay is directly linked to the dolomitic limestone in our soils.”  
—Harald Thiel

the escarpment into Lake Ontario at Niagara Falls. The nearly 13,500 acres of vineyards planted between the escarpment and the shores of Lake Ontario, and the Niagara River and Grimsby, make this Canada’s largest winegrowing area.

Although Niagara’s vineyards sit relatively far south, at about 43° latitude—the same global positioning as southern Oregon or Chianti—winters are decidedly cold. Growers have found that the distance to the moderating waters of the lake is what defines a site’s suitability for growing grapes, or corn.

I stop at Thomas Bachelder’s winery outside of Beamsville in western Niagara. A Montreal-born former wine journalist, Bachelder works with vineyards in Niagara, Oregon and Burgundy. His Niagara cellar is a simple but functional barn-like structure; he has little use for fancy equipment, he says: “In all three locations everything is done by hand, from vineyard to bottle, using wild yeasts and natural malolactic winemaking, and long aging in mainly neutral oak.”

He makes his wines in Oregon and Burgundy exactly the same way, wanting to let the regional variations define the style of the wines. Asked where his Ontario wines fall in the style spectrum, he laughs. “Niagara is in the middle of the Atlantic,” he says, meaning stylistically between the two, yet closer to Burgundy.

Bachelder, who worked extensively with chardonnay at Le Clos Jordanne before leaving to focus on his own label in 2009, has found over time that Ontario’s so-called benchlands give the best chardonnay. “Chardonnays from the appellations closer to the lakeside in general can provide wonderful wines but somehow lack the site definition of the bench,” he says.

Some geological history might provide the explanation. Ten thousand years ago, at the end of the last Pleistocene ice age, the retreating two-mile-thick Laurentide ice sheet that once covered most of Canada scoured the landscape and carved out the Great Lakes, leaving behind a complex mix of eroded sedimentary rock and reef structures. The hard dolomite of the escarpment withstood the erosion, and became the shoreline of ancient Lake Iroquois. As Iroquois in turn shrank to form present-day Lake Ontario, it left behind several terraced benches beneath the escarpment. The last step of the bench is clearly visible—it’s where Highway 81 runs east-west, marking the border between the Niagara Escarpment regional appellation and the lower Lincoln Lakeshore and Creek Shores appellations.

The benches have both shallower topsoil and a higher percentage of churned-up limestone than the flatter areas closer to the current shoreline, where more silt and clay have accumulated. “Even though stones are not often visible, the benchlands have more limestone powdered throughout the silty-clay soils, which makes the difference,” says Bachelder.

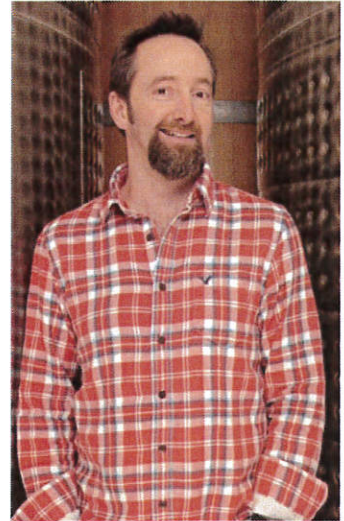
Each of the three bench appellations has its differences as well, he says: “Beamsville Bench is the closest to the lake, around three kilometers [two miles], giving wines that are tight and mineral. The Twenty Mile Bench yields more broadly textured wines with bigger fruit, thanks to the longer hang time that comes from being a little farther from the lake. The St. David’s Bench—the bench of Niagara-on-the-Lake—is the farthest from the lake at ten kilometers [4.5 miles] but closer to the Niagara River, and makes more weighty chardonnays.”

Yet, as he pours a few chardonnays for me to taste, it seems clear that it’s a little early to be drawing any definitive style lines: I find his Saunders Vineyard Chardonnay from Beamsville to be broad and rich, while the Wismer Vineyard from the Twenty Mile Bench is more energetic and sinewy.

I head down the road to see Harald Thiel, the owner of Hidden Bench. It’s near midday as we walk through his vineyards and the sun is hot—Niagara doesn’t lack heat or sunshine—but there’s a cool, gentle breeze coming off the lake. The crest of the escarpment is a few hundred meters behind us—essential, Thiel points out, for corralling those breezes and containing the lake’s moderating effect.



The Tawse Winery  
near Vineland.



As we walk, Thiel tells me that he established Hidden Bench in 2003 after tasting a bottle of local chardonnay, the 1998 Temkin-Paskus. “I thought: This is as good as anything I have in my cellar,” he says. That chardonnay had been made by winegrower Deborah Paskus and wine writer Steve Temkin, who had set out to test the quality limits of Ontario chardonnay in the early 1990s by making wine with ultra-low yields, barrel fermentation without added yeast and otherwise minimal intervention.

After doing some research, Thiel decided to plant a vineyard near where that wine was made, in what is now the Beamsville Bench. It’s close enough to both the lake and the escarpment, he says, to reap the benefits of both. “Plant grapes too far away from the lake and the growing season is too short to ripen most vinifera varieties, and winterkill is unavoidable,” Thiel says, explaining that Ontario is the second deepest of the Great Lakes and doesn’t freeze even in the harshest winter, preventing temperatures in nearby vineyards from dropping below the vine-killing range. In the spring, its cool waters delay budburst until spring frost is no longer a danger, while in the autumn, the summer-warmed water wards off the first fall frost, extending the growing season long enough to ripen the grapes.

At the same time, the escarpment plays a crucial role as well, Thiel says, as it re-circulates the lake’s breezes, reducing humidity and its attendant disease pressure. The bench is therefore a sort of sweet spot for chardonnay.

The soil here also sets the Beamsville Bench apart from Niagara’s other areas he says, echoing Bachelder. “The mineral character of our chardonnay is directly linked to the dolomitic limestone in

our soils, and particularly the active limestone component—five to six percent in our Felseck Vineyard, for example.” The drainage afforded by the bench’s gentle slope also allows soils to warm up more quickly in the spring and kicks off the growing season earlier.

Thiel pours a taste of his 2011 Felseck Vineyard Chardonnay to demonstrate. It’s tightly wound and stony, and even has a palpably chalky texture along with lifted floral aromatics and a succulent, sweet but fresh fruit core.

**That same bottle of Temkin-Paskus chardonnay also inspired Moray Tawse, a self-declared Burgundy fanatic—so much so that he hired Deborah Paskus and purchased six acres of vineyards in the Twenty Mile Bench, including the Robyn’s Block chardonnay planted in 1980. He’s since increased his Niagara holdings to nearly 200 acres.**

Paul Pender took over from Paskus in 2005, the year Tawse’s six-story, gravity-fed winery near Vineland opened to the public. With the firm’s vineyard expansion, Pender has had the opportunity to work in several appellations both on the bench and closer to the lake, as well as in the only appellation on top of the escarpment, Vinemount Ridge.

He finds that the regional variations in the wines are largely a question of soil. “Take two of my favorite vineyards: Robyn’s Block [Twenty Mile Bench] and Quarry Road [Vinemount Ridge]. Although both are essentially silty clay and limestone, Robyn’s Block makes rich, full-bodied chardonnay, while Quarry is all about minerality and focus. The difference is due to the proportions: more limestone at Quarry Road equals more minerality,” he says.

**Paul Pender has turned to farming organically, and has taken the additional step of converting Tawse’s estate vineyards to biodynamics.**

“In Prince Edward County, phenolic ripeness comes before sugar ripeness. We can make richly textured wines at under 13 percent alcohol.”  
—Norm Hardie



Norman Hardie's vineyards in Prince Edward County.

Pender is also quick to point out that scrupulous viticulture is critical in Ontario. “One of the biggest challenges we face is mildew,” he says. “But with rigorous canopy management and judicious use of organic sprays we have always managed to bring in a clean crop.” The season is also short and cool enough that aggressive thinning is required to get grapes fully ripe, which, of course, adds to cost.

Like Thiel at Hidden Bench, Pender has turned to farming organically, and has taken the additional step of converting Tawse’s estate vineyards to biodynamics. That’s a challenging move in Niagara, but one that’s becoming more common as growers seek to emulate some of the best wines coming out of the region.

**For another take on Niagara chardonnay, I head over to Stratus, on the east side of St. Catharines, Niagara’s only real city, closer to the Niagara River and the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, which gives its name to the regional appellation. French-born J-L Groux is one of Ontario’s most experienced winemakers, with more than 30 vintages in the bottle.**

Groux is also an advocate of a richer, fuller style of chardonnay, harvesting late and seeking maximum ripeness. The vineyards are well positioned for this style, he says—this part of the peninsula is one of the only areas where cabernet sauvignon, which he has planted, will ripen reliably. The Stratus chardonnay reflects the extra degree-days, as well as the deeper, more clay-rich soils typical of vineyards closer to the lakeshore than the escarpment. A taste of his 2012 Chardonnay reveals a full-bodied, creamy, almost opulent wine with an impression of sweetness from superripe fruit that is absent from bench chardonnays.

Granted, that 2012 is, in part, the result of a warm vintage; ask Paul Hobbs, the international wine consultant who has worked with Stratus since 2009, and he’ll tell you he finds Niagara’s climate marginal most years. For chardonnay, however, he sees this as an advantage, allowing for more freshness in the wines than most New World regions can naturally achieve. “I think that chardonnay is the most exciting white variety in Niagara,” he says.

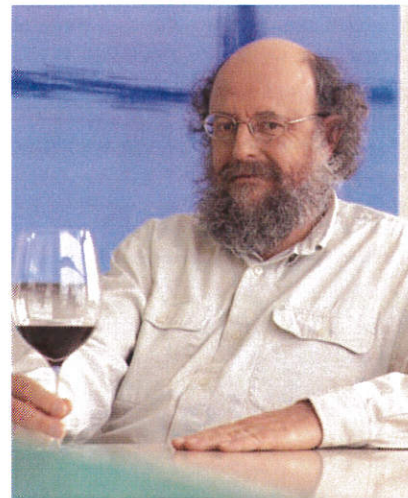
**If Niagara is at the margin, Prince Edward County is even more extreme.** The County, as locals call it, is on the opposite side of Toronto from Niagara, about two hours to the east on a virtual island, surrounded by the Bay of Quinte and Lake Ontario save for a narrow stretch of land. With a growing season that’s about a month shorter than Niagara’s, it is imperative to plant early-ripening varieties like chardonnay; even so, vines must be buried each autumn under a layer of soil to protect against temperatures that routinely drop well below 0°F. In the spring, vines are painstakingly un-hilled, a task done by hand to avoid damage to buds.

And yet, this is where Norm Hardie set up shop in 2003, after having made wine in Oregon, South Africa, Burgundy, New Zealand and California. “I’ve always believed the best wines with a sense of place are grown on the edge,” he says. “And PEC is definitely on the edge of the precipice.”

In addition to climate, Hardie attributes the character of the County’s wines to its soils, what geologists call the Trenton limestone plateau. Unlike the hard dolomitic limestone of Niagara, PEC’s younger calcareous chalk is much softer and more fractured, with a higher active component, so it’s more available to vine roots.

Plus, he adds, there’s less topsoil and clay. “The higher clay content of Niagara adds a richness and fullness that the County doesn’t have,” he says. “The County is always leaner and more mineral, with pure lemon-lime citrus.” His wines stand out for near-electrifying acids and laser precision in a light, low-alcohol frame. “Here, phenolic ripeness comes before sugar ripeness,” Hardie explains. “We can make richly textured wines at under 13 percent alcohol.”

The extremes haven’t deterred other intrepid winegrowers. Prince Edward County is now Ontario’s fastest growing region, with some 40-odd commercial wineries currently in operation; most are less than a decade old. Chardonnay, both still and sparkling, is quickly putting the region on the worldwide viticultural map. ■



At Stratus, in Niagara-on-the-Lake, J-L Groux has found a climate warm enough to reliably ripen cabernet sauvignon. His chardonnays are opulent and rich.