

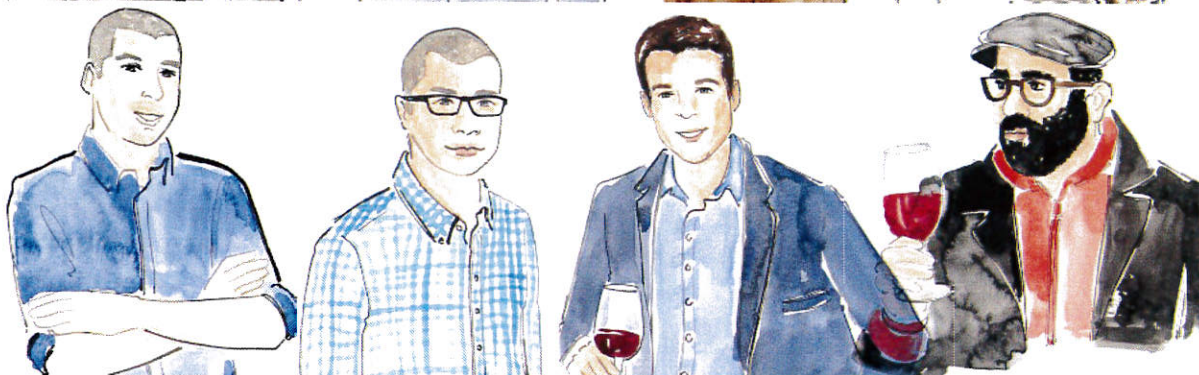
Wine & Spirits

SPECIAL ISSUE

1st Annual
INSIDER'S GUIDE



Conversations & Tastings with 50 Masters of Place



FALL 2016

wineandspiritsmagazine.com

\$6.99 • Canada \$7.99

Display until October 11, 2016



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Ontario Chardonnay

by John Szabo, MS



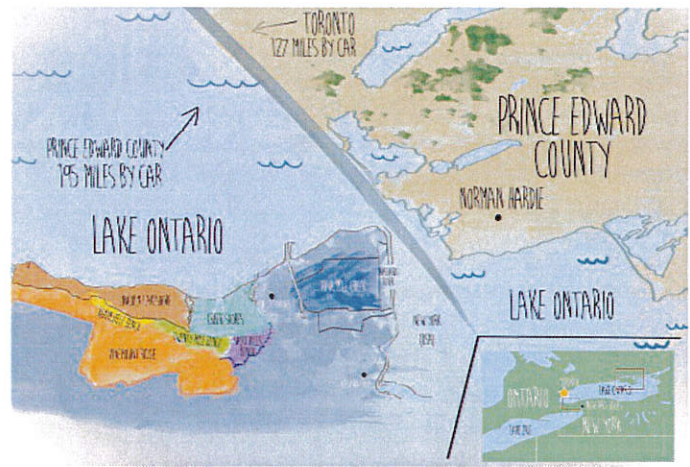
Chardonnay was the first *vitis vinifera* planted in Ontario in the late 1950s, and I've been shadowing it for 20 years. I've seen vineyards grow, and new regions and subregions emerge. I've watched the roster of quality producers expand, and single vineyard bottlings increase exponentially. Since first judging at the annual Canadian Wine Awards in 2003, I've tasted the growing confidence of winemakers in every vintage, ever more willing to let their particular patch of dirt do the talking, rather than relying on the techniques they brought home from school.

Out (mostly) are the clumsy, heavily oaked, placeless chardonnays of yore. In are the brilliant, finely tuned expressions that derive their acid, aromatic and flavor profiles from their origins. Crystalline Prince Edward County, pitch-perfect Niagara Escarpment, luscious Niagara-on-the-Lake; Ontario has a sensational range of regionally recognizable chardonnays at all prices points, every year. Hell, the grape is even the protagonist of Ontario's biggest and most important event, the International Cool Climate Chardonnay Celebration, or colloquially "i4c", held annually in Niagara. Although other varieties perform admirably, char-

donnay is Ontario's grape.

Ontario floats in the middle of the Atlantic. At least that's how Thomas Bachelder of Bachelder Wines once described the general style of Ontario chardonnay to me. And with winemaking projects in Oregon, Burgundy and Niagara, he's as well placed as anyone to situate the province's wines. It's fair. Chardonnay falls between typical Old and New World paradigms, with more fruit and flesh than, say, Burgundy, while they are more contained and less billowing than textbook warm-climate chardonnay. But beyond that simplification, big terroir variations within the province drive a range of styles—it's a five-hour drive from Niagara Falls to eastern Prince Edward County (PEC), after all.





1 Norman Hardie Prince Edward County Cuvée Chardonnay If you believe, as I do, that a grape's maximum expression is reached in the most marginal area in which it will ripen, PEC is just about perfect. It's cold. And bloody windy (just try cycling there). The region sits on a limestone plateau, a virtual island almost entirely surrounded by the Bay of Quinte and Lake Ontario. Stony soils offer high active calcium but little clay, which also contributes to naturally lean wines, more mineral than fruity. I've been under the mesmerizing spell of Hardie's Cuvée County Chardonnay for many vintages, but the 2013 especially, with its shimmering, crystalline citrus fruit dusted with chalk on a tightrope of hallmark County acids. As a bonus, the frame is feather-light. "Here, phenolic ripeness comes before sugar ripeness," Hardie explains. "We can make richly textured wines at well under 13 percent alcohol."

2 Thomas Bachelder Beamsville Bench Saunders Vineyard Chardonnay Chardonnay finds another sweet spot in the Niagara Peninsula under the imposing Niagara Escarpment, a 500-foot cliff of hard limestone and shale that runs along the southern boundary of the region. The escarpment contains the critical moderating effects of Lake Ontario, recirculating breezes and providing frost protection for the vineyards beneath it. Those sheltered, gently sloped north-facing benches, deposited 10,000 years ago by shrinking glacial Lake Iroquois and shaped by retreating glaciers, are some of Ontario's most prized vineyard sites.

Thomas Bachelder makes one of the finest chardonnays in the Beamsville Bench, the westernmost, and warmest, of four sub-appellations within the Niagara Escarpment. The 2013 Saunders Vineyard Chardonnay is his best yet, from old vines farmed organically by the nonagenarian Warren Saunders. It neatly captures the generosity imparted by this lower lying parcel just two miles from Lake Ontario, yet also reverberates from within, a facet that Bachelder refers to as "a taut inner energy," which he believes is a hallmark of chardonnay from this silty, sandy and limestone-laced terroir.

3 Hidden Bench Beamsville Bench Felseck Vineyard Chardonnay The bottling from Hidden Bench's organically certified 3.37-acre parcel of chardonnay in the Felseck Vineyard, also on the Beamsville Bench, reveals just how critical distance from the lake and elevation are in Niagara. The site, planted in 1992 in particularly limestone-rich soil (five to seven percent active), is only about two-thirds of a mile south of Saunders Vineyard, but it gains about 200 feet in elevation, sloping up on the next bench towards the escarpment. The difference is enough to encourage a more slimmed-down expression of chardonnay, putting chalky minerality in the foreground. The 2013 was harvested in early October, fully ripe at just 21.5° Brix, while a careful reductive approach in the winery also helps to tighten the screws on fruit and highlight ripe acids and Felseck's inherently stony character.

4 Pearl-Morissette Twenty Mile Bench Cuvée Dix-Neuvième Chardonnay Just east of the Beamsville Bench, the adjacent Twenty Mile Bench sub-appellation is marginally cooler, being farther from the lake (1,523 growing degree days vs. Beamsville's 1,588). It's where sommelier-turned-winemaker François Morissette established Pearl-Morissette in 2007, after seven vintages in Burgundy. In 2013—the most impressive vintage yet from the estate's vineyard on 19th Street ("Dix-Neuvième")—Morissette was able to let the grapes hang late for full flavor development, while tight acids held on to the end. But most interestingly, his winemaking approach—warm, wild ferments, minimal sulfur addition (usually just before bottling), use of mostly old puncheons and, occasionally, Georgian clay *qvevri* for aging—has revealed a unique and unwavering facet of the Twenty Mile Bench: chardonnay with a palpably salty taste, highly resistant to oxygen, and, in the case of 19th Street in particular, a recurring herbal-fennel-spearmint-like flavor.

5 Henry of Pelham Short Hills Bench Cuvée Catharine Carte Blanche Brut Blanc de Blancs Continuing east from Twenty Mile Bench, the Short Hills Bench lies slightly farther still from the lake as the escarpment angles south-eastward. It's here that the pioneering Speck brothers of Henry of Pelham found perfect conditions to grow some of Canada's most impressive bottle-fermented sparkling, and they've been doing it for longer, and more consistently, than anyone, since 1999. The secret lies in the Short Hills' cooler, heavier clays, which naturally restrict yield and berry size, and slow down sugar accumulation, so that flavor maturity arrives at low Brix. The vintage-dated Carte Blanche Brut Blanc de Blancs is the top cuvée from the estate's oldest chardonnay vines, planted in the mid-1980s. A small portion of old puncheon-fermented juice is included, and the wine spends up to five years on the lees. I love the wine's elegant styling, building layers of citrus and green apple fruit, delicate brioche and puff pastry-yeasty flavors on a firm acid frame.

6 Southbrook Four Mile Creek Poetica Chardonnay Northeast from the Short Hills Bench, on the other side of St. Catharines towards the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, the peninsula flattens out into the Four Mile Creek sub-appellation. Here, moisture-retentive clay-loam; flat, sunlight-maximizing topography; and higher-than-average diurnal temperature shifts conspire to produce Ontario's most full-bodied and generously fruity chardonnays. This is where I go to seek power and concentration. "Being in a decidedly warmer part of the Peninsula dictates a richer style," confirms Southbrook winemaker Ann Sperling. Her range of chardonnays, crafted at Canada's first biodynamic winery (Demeter certified in 2008), wrote the textbook for the sub-appellation. Poetica is the pinnacle, made only in top vintages from a selection of barrels, and the 2013—an excellent chardonnay vintage—sees lemon custard and apple crumble mingle comfortably with lime zest on a near endless finish. But this is still Ontario, don't forget, where even lusciousness and generosity meet refinement and balance, somewhere in the Atlantic. ■