

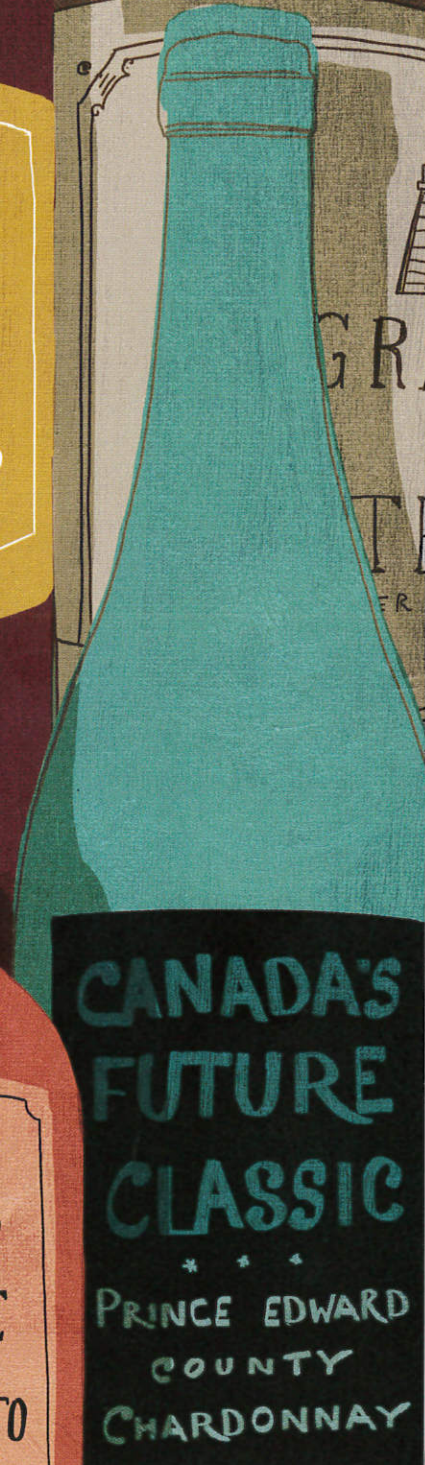
CLASSIC WINES - PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

Wine & Spirits

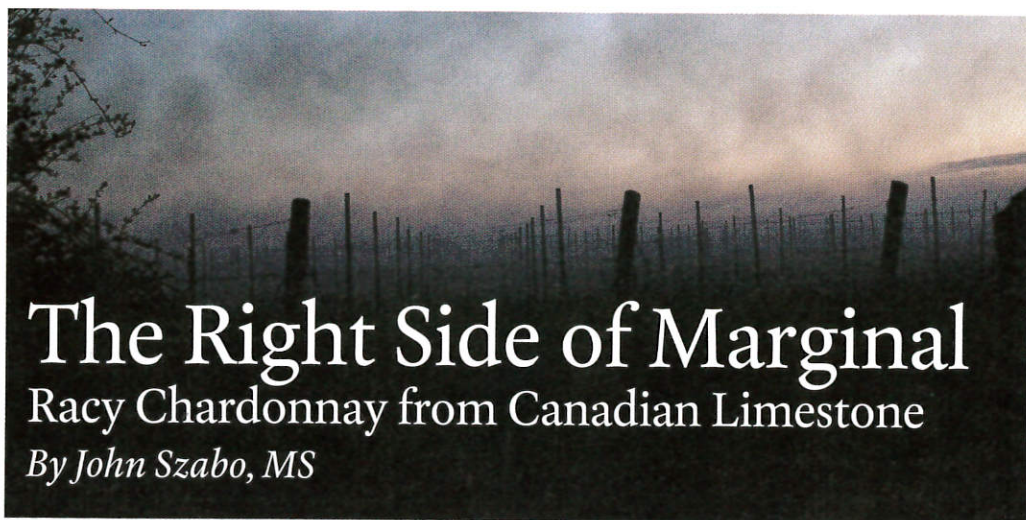
SPECIAL ISSUE

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FALL 2015
wineandspiritsmagazine.com
\$6.99 • Canada \$7.99
DISPLAY UNTIL OCT 13, 2015
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71658 02038



The Right Side of Marginal

Racy Chardonnay from Canadian Limestone

By John Szabo, MS

The County is essentially a shelf of fractured limestone and clay surrounded by water—making it perhaps the only region in Canada, perhaps in all of the Western Hemisphere, with this combination of free-draining limestone and genuinely cool climate.



Label illustration by Mike Hirshon.

“Consider Burgundy, where pinot and chardonnay just barely ripen most vintages. Or syrah from the Rhône: It’s much more exciting in the north than the south,” says winegrower Norman Hardie. “Look around. The most interesting flavors always come in the marginal ripening zones for any grape variety.”

When Hardie looked to set up his own winery in 2003, he searched for an edgy place—and found it in Canada, in Prince Edward County.

PEC, or simply “the County,” as it’s locally known, is a decidedly cool, virtual island in Lake Ontario, just off Highway 401 between Toronto and Montreal and a couple of hours south of Ottawa. One intrepid grower planted the County’s first grapevines in the early 1990s, but all were hybrids and the wines attracted little attention. But by the end of the 1990s, as the Canadian wine industry was gaining confidence in the Niagara Peninsula and the Okanagan Valley, people started to consider Prince Edward County more seriously. The skeptics scoffed, pointing to the climate—measurably colder than any other wine region in Canada at the time, which is to say very cold. “We weren’t just concerned about winters,” Hardie says, even though winterkill is a real threat. “We were also worried that the growing season simply wouldn’t be long enough.”

But, he adds, “the soils were perfect.” The County is essentially a shelf of fractured limestone and clay surrounded by water—making it perhaps the only region in Canada, and all of the Western Hemisphere for that matter, with this combination of free-draining limestone and genuinely cool climate.

Hardie went ahead and planted six acres of pinot noir in the first year, and two acres of chardonnay the following year in the township of Hillier on the County’s west side. It wasn’t easy: Hardie learned to bury his vines every fall to protect them against winter’s deep freezes, and un-hill them by hand in spring. He’s found that the timing must be perfect (or lucky): after the danger of a late spring freeze has passed, but before buds have started to push, which increases the likelihood of damage while unburying canes. And during the rest of the season, “viticulture must be perfect,” says Hardie. Disease

pressure is high; the proximity to water encourages all kinds of molds, mildews and fungi. Only tiny yields, in the range of two tons per hectare or less, stand the chance of fully ripening, and even then only with meticulous canopy management. Production costs are necessarily high.

But when it all comes together, the results are seriously compelling. “The 2006 chardonnay confirmed that we were onto something,” says Hardie. But the real breakthrough came in 2008. “It was a rainy, miserable vintage, but proved that even in tough years great wine was possible—the well-drained limestone is critical. The ’08 chardonnay was magic.” That particular wine caused a stir in the trade when it was first released. Pungent and laser sharp, like freshly ground limestone stirred in green apple and citrus juice, it was like nothing that had ever been made in Canada. It was even sent multiple times to the appeals panel before the official tasters granted it appellation status. In any case, it set the tone for the future County style: firm, very flinty chardonnay. Hardie has since drawn even finer lines, such as moving to mostly used 500-liter barrels and fine-tuning lees contact to better articulate his terroir. He still considers native yeasts essential to expressing place.

Now, some 15 years later, Hardie is joined by wineries such as Hinterland, Closson Chase, Rosehall Run, Exultet and Huff Estates in making top-notch chardonnay, while others like The Old Third and Hubbs Creek are also producing pinot noir that makes a strong case for a future classic as well. A regional style has become clearly defined, one based on knife-edged balance. Ripe flavor at very low alcohol is a hallmark—Hardie’s wines are often under 11 percent alcohol, and yet are anything but green, and astonishingly concentrated. Mineral (non-fruit) flavors can be extreme, like a pure and pristine, ice-cold glacial stream on a hot summer’s day. ■