



**CANADA DRY, or MORE THAN JUST ICEWINE:**

**THE GREAT WINES FROM CANADA'S NIAGARA REGION,  
part I**

*By Ian D'Agata*

*This is part I of a two part article describing the wines and the producers of one of my favourite wine country destinations in the world, Ontario's beautiful and bucolic Niagara region. There are fewer wine areas anywhere I would rather stroll or drive around in at a leisurely pace, especially in the colder months when tourists and the "weekend-only wine warriors" are home where they can't disturb.*

*In part I, you will find a general introduction to Niagara and my experiences with what was once a fledgling wine industry, plus tasting notes and descriptions of the wines and people behind five estates. Listed in alphabetical order, these are: Cave Spring Cellars, Daniel Lenko Winery, Henry of Pelham, Hidden Bench, and Southbrook. Coming next, in part II (on-line by mid march 2010) the bulk of the winery descriptions and tasting notes: the wines of Angel's Gate, Chateau de Charmes, Creekside, Coyote's Run, Featherstone, Fielding, Hillebrand Estate, Inniskillin, Konzelmann, Le Clos Jordanne, Malivoire, Peller Estates, Pillitteri, Reif, Tawse, Thirty Bench, plus a select few wineries from outside Niagara.*

*Happy reading!*

More than anything else, the single best evidence of just how much Niagara's wines have improved over the decades is the number of Niagara wineries that no longer make Icewine. Whereas it used to be that the only Canadian, never mind Niagara, wine anyone ever talked about or pushed on you was Icewine, nowadays that is no longer true. In what will undoubtedly be a surprising turn of events to many, many Niagara wineries are now focusing on premium dry wines, and have become remarkably adept at doing so. Indeed, you will have a hard time finding better Pinot Noir and Riesling in other New World countries. Certainly there are still great Icewines being made by many estates; but more wineries than perhaps even Canadians themselves could ever imagine are now concentrating on making excellent dry wines, actively seeking out and concentrating their efforts on the best grape varieties matched to specific microclimates and terroirs. In fact, terroir lovers ought to take note that after Burgundy, Alsace, Germany and Piedmont, Niagara is one of the most interesting terroir driven winemaking areas of the world. That in itself, more than any single other bit of data, tells you just how much wine making and wine sales have progressed in this region in the last twenty years.

I was born in Canada. That helps put this article in perspective, because even though I was born into an Italian family that had only temporarily moved to Canada due to my father's work, there is, undoubtedly, a part of me that wants Canadian wines to stand out and be successful. Believe it or not, I'm still a huge Raptors, Blue Jays and Maple Leafs fan. I'll admit that remaining a fan of the latter team has gotten to be hard work over the years, but that's another story.

Let me be clear, though: whatever deeply-rooted love I may hold out for Canada's wines (and I do), the fact is that some, many, are simply splendid efforts that deserve to be known and appreciated on a much larger scale than the present one. That wasn't always the case: but today Canadian wine is, and from a not-so-small number of wineries, of world class quality. Tellingly, most Canadian wine is consumed locally by Canadians themselves, a sure sign that locals know a good thing when they see, or taste, one. However, the single most exciting thing, at least for me, is to have been privileged to witness over the decades the immense improvement these wines have undergone; from those pioneer years to today's wine bonanza, in which one can buy a great bottle of juice almost at every turn. Therefore, I cherish my Canadian wine heritage even more so today: while it's easy to start jumping on Canada's wine bandwagon of late, it is only through having lived those trying early times that one can fully evaluate, and judge, the wines made in Canada today.

### **A very brief overview of Canada's wines**

While it used to be that Canadian wines worth talking about were made more or less only in Ontario and British Columbia (B.C), Canada now makes wine, successfully, in more than one province; and while B.C.'s Okanagan Valley and Ontario's Niagara region still get the brunt of the media attention (as they still make not just the largest number of wines, but also the best), the fact is there are some very pretty wines coming out of Québec and Atlantic Canada as well. In fact, the latter area, long known mainly for lobster and dreamy seaside landscapes, is now turning out some very delicate, lovely wines that have recently grabbed my attention.

Of course, Okanagan and Niagara are still the two places in which you'll find most of Canada's great wines, and the two are worlds apart in the wines they offer, the result of extremely different geologic and climatic conditions. Very generally speaking, while the former is much warmer, almost hot, and characterized by little rainfall, the latter is a perfect example of a cool climate viticultural area not unlike those of New Zealand, northern France or Italy, and Oregon. It is in Niagara that Canada's best white wines are made, especially from Riesling, while Okanagan still holds the upper hand when it comes to red wines. That said, these broad generalizations are starting to lose importance and truth (along the lines of the traditionalist versus modernist winemaker debate in Piedmont), and one can just as easily find great red wines from Niagara (especially pinot noir of at times world-class caliber) as great white wines from B.C. (especially Chardonnay, and some interesting Pinot Gris/Pinot Grigio and Rieslings as well).

Even more interesting are the subtle and not so subtle differences present in wines made from the same grape varieties in different sub-zones or appellations of the single provinces, such as for example the Lake Erie North Shore, Niagara, or Prince Edward County in Ontario or between those of Vancouver Island, the Okanagan and the Similkameen Valleys in B.C. The Lake Erie North Shore and Pelee Island are the two most southern viticultural areas of Ontario (Canada, actually) and have the same growth degree days (GDD) of northern California, while Prince Edward County, a peninsula jutting out into Lake Ontario on its northeastern side, is where some of the country's finest limestone soils are found. Though this is an area with an immense potential to make high quality Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs, it is unfortunately plagued by extremely cold winters. The lake often freezes, and the vines are afforded little shelter from the brutally cold winds swirling and sweeping about. Still, the Burgundy soil parallels have not been lost on people, and hence the desire to try and make world class wine while braving rigid weather conditions: who knows, but the global warming effect may end up giving a hand in this neck of the Ontario woods! At the opposite end of

the weather spectrum, the Okanagan and Similkameen Valleys of B.C. have probably more in common with the vineyard areas of eastern Washington State than they do with Niagara, or any other Canadian region for that matter. This is where Canada's finest reds from syrah, merlot, and cabernet sauvignon are made. On the other hand, B.C.'s Vancouver Island is characterized by a cold and often wet (and more importantly, long) growing season thanks to the influence of the nearby Pacific Ocean.

Wine lovers need to realize that there are standout, world caliber wineries made in both Ontario and B.C., and it is heartwarming to see that more and more of them are devoting their time to visiting the wineries there. It helps that there are hardly two prettier wine country destinations in the whole world: I for one believe Niagara and Okanagan to be often prettier and less Disney-esque than many other wine country destinations that are better known, and more publicized, by glossy travel or wine magazines.

### **Memory lane: why I love Niagara wines and the early reactions to them**

I grew up living, and drinking, the birth of Canadian wines. While I was a student at the Toronto French School in the seventies, I experienced first hand the efforts and successes (and misses, of which there were many) of Canada's fledgling wine industry. Yet, there were enough successes already in the late 70s and early 80s to hook me forever; and I became a passionate supporter of Niagara's terroir and its wines. One of my life defining moments in wine (and one that taught me a number of different lessons), came on a summer afternoon in Toronto in 1981 while sitting in a friend's beautiful Forest Hill living room and tasting a 1971 Barolo I had brought back over from Italy. In a thoughtful and thankful gesture, I walked John Macdonald, then head of the LCBO's Rare Wine and Spirit store (now called Vintages, but I'm blessed to have started in wine early enough to have known the original) holding a glass of what he deemed to be "... the best wine anyone has ever made in Canada to date". It was the Inniskillin Vidal Icewine that had just been presented to him that day by the winery, and it literally blew me away. I grant you, not the equivalent of a Willi Haag Eiswein or TBA, but an utterly great wine, and one that clearly drove the point home that fantastic wine in Niagara was certainly there to be had.

From then on, I began to actively promote the quality of Canada's better wines, albeit in the very limited ways that a twenty-something university student could manage to in those pre-internet and pre-electronic mail days of Rome, Italy. Though not a generally known fact, I am extremely proud to be the first ever wine writer to talk, write and guide tastings, and to have done so routinely over the years, on Niagara's wines in Italy. Clearly, this was done for small groups of wine enthusiasts who followed wine tasting classes in a downtown Rome enoteca, and the bottles were those I managed to buy in TO and stash into my carry-on in those less terrorist-plagued times. This, of course, was a necessity, because no wine from Canada was sold at all in Italy in 1981 or 1982. Can you believe I once brought 24 bottles on board a 747 without anybody saying anything? Of course, I got my share of sympathetic smiles or vigorous shakings of the head in a "he's crazy" type look, but it didn't matter. In 1990 I was the first to hold a tasting of New World Merlots in Rome in which a Canadian wine was present (a 1988 Stoney Ridge bottling from the mythical Lenko vineyard, if I recall correctly), and even earlier, in 1983, the first to hold a tasting of Rieslings from around the world in which, alongside wonderful bottles of Rauenthaler Baiken Spatlese and Ock Bock Auslese, there were also bottles of Inniskillin and Chateau de Charmes. More than a decade later, I was the first to write about Canadian icewines in a major wine magazine of Italy (the July 2002 issue of Gambero Rosso) and to hold an exclusive tasting of Niagara's Icewines for the Rome Slowfood branch (in which the Icewines of Inniskillin showed well). One needs to realize that when I first

proposed an article on the Icewines of Niagara back in the summer of 1989 to the same Gambero Rosso magazine, the director laughed me right out of the room.

Of course, there are not just memories of halcyon days and wonderful wines. Major wine books didn't even cover Niagara back in the 70s, and wine "experts", as mentioned above, couldn't be bothered to try the wines as late as the 1980s. I distinctly remember a number of Burgundy wine producers (and note, some of today's more famous names at that) making fun of or shaking their heads in disbelief at the news that a Canadian Icewine had won a gold medal at Vinexpo. One friend (who writes for an important wine magazine) still makes fun of my good intentions and breaks out in spasmodic guffaws every time he thinks back to the time when I insisted he try (back in the 80s) what I decreed was, perhaps hanging out on much more than just a limb, "Canada's second best ever Beerenauslese style wine". You may wonder about that title –I know I do today– but it was an effort on my part, however misguided, to get a huge German Riesling fan (and admitted wine snob) to *just try* the 1986 BA (botrytis affected) Riesling from Inniskillin. Admittedly, that wine will never be mistaken as one of the greatest wines produced by Inniskillin, but it is a memorable wine in that it indicated Canada, or Niagara at least, could in fact make interesting, if not great, sweet wine other than Icewine. "Second best" in that I hoped to subtly point out that there was even better than that around! Clearly, that sort of title didn't impress my friend much, who was left, between one laugh and a hoot, completely non-plussed. That the wine was followed up on the market by the much less successful T.B.A. (or totally botrytis affected) wine by Chateau de Charmes didn't help matters. Even I didn't like it. Also, I am not sure that Canada's government appointed personnel abroad did much for its wines, at least back then, or even understood how good and special the wines were. Even though I met, and on a number of different occasions, individuals from the Canadian consulate in Milan, they seemed to limit themselves to inviting people out to dinner and at the tasting stall at the Vinitaly fair. In fact, Donald Ziraldo, for the longest time the image and soul of Inniskillin, did probably more singlehandedly for Niagara's wines, at least here in Europe, than anybody else I can think of.

In any case, the sad truth is that back in the '80s, '90s and even the turn of the new century, it was almost impossible to get German or Alsatian Riesling die-hards to consider trying a Canadian Riesling, and the only reason they even ever bothered to was due to my good natured insistence. Of course, there is no truth to the rumour that many of my friends left Rome in those years without leaving me their forwarding address. And even if they did, I always managed to find them again, glass of Canadian Riesling still firmly in hand.

Today, things couldn't be more different. Sure, there are still wine snobs who will only wax on poetically about Van Volxem or Egon Muller or the likes, very great producers indeed, but anyone with an open mind trying Niagara Riesling remains more than just a little impressed. Niagara (and Canada) has also done quite a bit to help itself in the last ten years, when there has been an almost exponential growth in wineries and wine interest. Niagara, for one, has undertaken a series of very serious, top class zonation and climate studies of its wine production area. If one stops to think of how little has been done in terms of zonation and the establishment of crus in Italy, for example, where just about any joker can come up with 95+ scoring Brunello (for instance) though it's made from grapes grown in flatland vineyards never known to produce anything of note, then my hat is off to Ontario, and Niagara in particular (as not all in Ontario have taken this commendable route). Another very important decision taken was to create an entity that would allow for the training of a local workforce; and so, the Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute at Brock University is a major landmark and a real feather in the cap of all producers, politicians and wine lovers who worked to see it happen. This learning facility, located in St.Catharines, has been training winemakers since 1997, and was a fundamental step, in my view a necessary one, in taking

Niagara's wines into the wine production big leagues. The creation of the Ontario-wide Vintner's Quality Alliance (VQA) was of course also of paramount importance, an effort to classify wines along the lines of France's AOC or Italy's DOC systems. The current war being waged against the misleading "Cellared in Canada" category of wines, which runs the risk of severely damaging the credibility of the Canadian wine industry, is also a very welcome step, and one that can only be commended, though some of the reasons for having created such a category of wines in the first place are understandable enough.

### **Niagara: world class Riesling and a whole lot more**

Niagara is probably Canada's most important wine producing area, hugging the southwestern shore of Lake Ontario, only about an hour south-west of the sprawling metropolis that is Toronto. This is cool- climate wine country, and in fact the most successful wines here made are those from white grapes such as riesling and chardonnay, or cooler weather red varieties such as pinot noir. And although Lake Ontario has an immensely important thermoreflective and thermoconservation effect (it stores or conserves heat during the day, then reflects it back out during the night) that allows proper ripening of the grapes, the winter weather can still get brutally cold. So much so that merlot is now slowly being abandoned by many producers in favour of the hardier cabernet franc, a variety that appears to hold considerable promise in this part of the world. Still, amongst red varieties, it's pinot noir that is king, and there are some amazing world class Pinots being made in Niagara, as yet unknown to the public at large. Another very successful red wine I find made here, though in small quantities, is the peppery Baco Noir (Henry of Pelham's version is outstanding, especially the Reserve bottling).

As successful as the latter red wines may be, Niagara is an amazing white wine country, with world class Riesling, improving, impressive Chardonnays (at least some), some very good Gewurztraminer, and promising Pinot Grigio, amongst others. The long growing season allows for development of complexity and a degree of nuance that are not commonplace in the wines of many warm weather regions of the New World. Still, though Niagara is often bone-quivering cold in some of its worst winters (and the strong winds that never seem to let up help that cold air penetrate right into your bones), it's easy to forget that it does sit at the same latitude of Tuscany, that it has a number of GDD more or less equivalent to those of Chianti, and average summer temperatures of 24°C (roughly 75° F). The fall season is usually dry and long and relatively cool (temperatures range between 6-16°C or 43-60°F) and there is enough rainfall (and snow) that irrigation is not required.

### **Niagara: world Riesling's fourth way**

Just as there are three main examples of world Pinot Noir (Oregon, New Zealand and Burgundy), there are, by most accounts, also three main schools, or styles, of Riesling: Alsace, Germany (as different as those of the Mosel, Pfalz, or Rheingau may be, they still have a very recognizable "German soul"), and Australia (as exemplified by those of the Clare and Eden Valleys). It is my view that Niagara represents the fourth paradigm or style of world Riesling (and Italy's might one day be the fifth). That there exists a Niagara-specific personality to Riesling cannot, and should not, surprise anyone: riesling (note to the reader from Ian: please remember I always write the grape variety with the first letter in lower case, while the wine has its first initial in block letter; hence, riesling refers to the grape variety, Riesling to the wine) is the world's premier grape variety at translating soil and climate differences into a glass. And unlike pinot noir or nebbiolo, it allows you to do so at fairly high yields and without going insane in both the vineyard and the cellar. Hence, it allows a much easier recognition of microclimates from place to place, something that is not true

with the two aforementioned red grapes that rarely give wines resembling the wines made in their country of origin.

In Niagara, there are essentially only two clones used, the Weis and the Johannisburg. Not surprisingly, the former is much used in Niagara, as it was developed by Herman Weis back in his nursery in Germany, and brought over to Canada. In fact, he once owned Vineland Estates and his daughter Anne is married to Tom Pennacchetti of Cave Spring Cellars. Rootstocks are also more or less the same ones used, such as 3309, and winemaking techniques are fairly similar, so what you are left with is a very pure expression of terroir.

Niagara's main viticultural areas are those around the towns of Jordan and Niagara-on-the-Lake, but the viticultural geography is actually much more complicated than it appears at a superficial glance. As mentioned above, one of the most exciting aspects of Niagara is the painstaking care that has gone into detailing the different micro-appellations within the larger appellation. So though we still speak of wines of Niagara, much as we speak of those of Napa or Barolo, one should also think of Niagara's wines in terms of the differences present between, for example, a Riesling made from grapes grown on the Beamsville Bench and one from the Lincoln Lakeshore. On a general note, the area around Jordan is cooler, while the area of Niagara-on-the-Lake has more heat units. Not surprisingly, the whites of the former are generally more lively, with many beautifully dynamic Rieslings and Chardonnays to be had, while the latter is where cabernet sauvignon and other Bordeaux red varieties fare better. And much as it's fascinating to witness the lime versus grapefruit of Riesling's coming from the Eden and the Clare Valley respectively, so it is with Niagara. Today, true wine connoisseurs are beginning to look, or should, for the subtle nuances that set apart wines not just from around Jordan or Niagara-on-the-Lake, but also those present in wines made in sub-zones as different as those of the St. Arthur's Bench, the Beamsville Bench or the Short Hills Bench. There is a real difference between the wines made from the Lincoln Lakeshore, for example, or those from the Beamsville Bench: to my mind at least, the wines made around Niagara-on-the-Lake tend to exhibit a soft peachiness, while those from the Short Hills Bench are more characterized by riper citrus and hints of tropical fruit, that are present but less immediately obvious in the wines from the Beamsville Bench, which are often even higher in acid.

Granted, these differences are as minute as those of the geology involved: for example, the Twenty Mile Bench has, from a geological perspective, two terrace-like formations to speak of, not just one, with the upper terrace sitting on more limestone. And that difference does end up being recognizable in the glass, depending on where the Riesling is grown. The vineyards of the Beamsville Bench probably have the best frost protection of all, certainly better than Twenty Mile, other than those vineyards located right on the lakeshore, but many of those are quality-challenged soils anyways. It is interesting, when studying the soil compositions of the various Niagara sub-zones, that the Beamsville and Twenty Mile Bench were the only two Benches that were never below water in past geologic eras, while the St. David's Bench and the Short Hills Bench were once estuaries; since the former sub-zones have never been under water, their soils are very stony, heavy clay till resulting from glacial, not alluvial, deposits. And therein lies another reason for the differences found in the wines made in each area. Different still is the Lincoln Lakeshore, where soils tend to be more sandy, almost loamless clay till, with only pockets of clay scattered throughout. The climate is also quite different from sub-area to sub-area: for example, St. Arthur's Bench is much warmer than the Beamsville Bench, and in fact the Rieslings of the former are fuller bodied, and many producers are now preferring to bet on the success of red wines there. In the end, the age of the vines also plays a fundamentele role: though it's hard to argue with the quality of the Beamsville Bench terroir, the Twenty Mile Bench, for example, can count on plenty of older vines and that in part helps explain the good quality of wines produced there.

### **A description of the most recent vintages in Niagara**

#### **2008**

Long, cool growing season with above average temperatures and good amounts of sunlight. June, which was especially warmer than average, also presented 50% more rainfall than average. July and August were challenging in that temperatures dropped to almost unseasonably cool levels, with precipitation continuing to fall at above average rates, leading to higher than usual vine disease pressure. Fortunately, the last two weeks in August and the first week of September were postcard-perfect, setting the stage for a good vintage. September and October were characterized by cool, sunshine filled days that allowed for slow, proper ripening of the grapes.

#### **2007**

This year was characterized by an essentially warm and dry growing season, though some areas in Niagara were plagued by thunderstorms, while others experienced near drought conditions. April through August had above average temperatures and very low rainfall. Some of the younger vines underwent heat stress and manual irrigation was needed in some areas. An early harvest year with a small crop, this is generally viewed as potentially a very great vintage for Niagara's red wines.

#### **2006**

A very challenging vintage preceded by a normal winter with normal temperatures variations and precipitation. Unfortunately, temperatures from April through September, included, were well below average, and to compound problems, rainfall came down in above average annual quantities. August was slightly warmer than usual with less rainfall than normally recorded on annual average, and provided some comfort for frayed nerves everywhere. Powdery mildew was a real problem for many of those who chose to exercise less than ideal viticultural energy levels in their vineyards. If I had to use just one word to describe this vintage, it would be rainy.

#### **2005**

A short crop year, with a freeze in spring that acted as a natural reductor of yields (some people lost up to 90% of their crop); the best wines have balance and charm.

### **The best wine producers and wines of Niagara**

There are about 100 different wineries in Niagara today that make wine from locally grown grapes or fruit wines. The latter have long been a tradition in Ontario (as far as one can talk of tradition in Ontario's local wine-making industry, which became large scale only as of the 1980s), and are interesting, high quality examples that deserve a try. Niagara wines account for about half of all the total wine consumed by locals, and that was not the case back in the 70s. In fact, there were only eight registered wineries in 1970 in all of Niagara. The amazing pace at which the Ontario wine industry, and Niagara's in particular, has grown and improved in such a short time span, is a clear-cut sign of not just the fine wine potential this beautiful country holds, but also a statement on how producers working together can create a major wine production area out of seemingly nothing,

bringing wealth and prosperity to many, and sheer wine drinking joy to even more people everywhere.

### CAVE SPRING CELLARS

[www.cavespringcellars.com](http://www.cavespringcellars.com)

Angelo Pavan and Len Pennacchetti, the founders of what is arguably Canada's single best winery today, have known each other since the age of five, and have been friends forever. Therein, perhaps, lies part of the secret of the amazing success this estate has encountered over the years. It was during graduate work that they decided to take a course in wine appreciation. However, there is a lot more than just friendship at the core of this estate's rise to stardom: for example, their decision to work with nothing but *Vinifera* varieties at a time when most Niagara wineries were still leaning heavily in the direction of hybrids, felt to be better suited to Niagara's rigid winters. One may smile at this fact today, but as a marketing strategy it was a stroke of genius, as it placed Cave Spring on a level that was unattainable by their competitors; and though at the time the importance of such a decision was probably lost on most of the local wine lovers, Cave Spring grabbed my interest right from the start. These guys, I thought, are on to something: a conclusion that anyone drinking an example of someone else's dry Vidal, for example, would have also had no trouble reaching as well.

Angelo Pavan is a quiet, intense man: most important, he's a keen listener and it impresses me just how eager he is to learn and improve, even after all these years at the helm of an important winery. I remember a lunch in Italy where he sat down with Jean-Claude Berrouet, the famous Pomerol winemaker, and peppered the Frenchman with question after question. There's another factor that helps explain Cave Spring's success over the years. Another factor still is evident from some of the viticultural decisions they made early on, signalling, at least to me, a dedication to quality and the will to do things right, at a time when in Niagara this wasn't as commonplace as it is today. For example, for their first plantings, they chose rootstocks based on the single variety and the specific site, but, generally speaking, started with low vigour rootstock (especially for their reds) such as the 101-14 and Riparia. They also searched out for the lowest yielding clones of for all their varieties. Amongst the many reasons for success, I would also point out one of the better wine labels around; though the new one is more elegant and refined, there is no doubt in my mind that the previous label, an elegant mix of white, teal blue and hawks circling overhead, was simple, easy to read, elegant yet colourful, and with plenty of appeal for all animal lovers (that Canadians are well known to be!) lurking in Ontario LCBO and Vintages wine store aisles.

A believer in letting wine make itself with only those interventions that are really necessary, Pavan smiles and says " I really think that the more chemistry you know, the worse the wine is! Personally, I loved Burgundy from the start, and always admired a lot of their non-interventionist winemaking, but it was always too expensive for me. In 1974, before we opened the winery, we planted De Chaunac, thinking that the hybrids were the way to go, then in 1978 we went with chardonnay and riesling, about six acres of each, and seeing that the wines were actually pretty good, in 1984 we planted still more chardonnay and gamay. Once we felt we had the hang of things, we decided to take the plunge officially, and so our first vintage was the '86. We moved to our present-day facility in '87, in an old downtown Jordan building (and that had previously been the home of the Jordan winery, and an apple warehouse before then, as far back as 1870), but we were able to buy it only in 1990". Things have certainly progressed since: in 1993, they opened the On the Twenty restaurant, which is, simply put not just one of Canada's best restaurants but one of the prettiest and best wine country food destinations in the world, and now a luxury hotel in a building

across the street from the winery. Wine wise, the estate now owns 125 acres and makes about 650,000 bottles a year.

Giuseppe Pennacchetti, grandfather of Len, came from the Marche town of Fermo in Italy, and in fact Fermo Farms was the original grape growing name of the business, and Len was very close to his grandfather...it was in fact the Niagara grape-growing class of the time that showed them you could grow tender fruit here. One day Len's dad John flew over the escarpment to look over the area and see which they really liked best to set up the Cave Spring Cellars winery on. "He eve asked us" recalls Angelo "So what do you boys think... but he'd already made a downpayment on the area he thought best!".

I ask Angelo which grape varieties he likes for Niagara, and interestingly, perhaps surprisingly, it turns out he's a big believer in cabernet franc "... a variety I'm sure we'll do better with over time" he smiles. Another variety he likes is chenin blanc: " We're encountering some difficulty in getting it to ripen, so we thought that sparkling wine might be a solution... for whatever reason, I was thinking of sparkling Vouvray one day, and it just hit me! So we first planted chenin in '99, and after some winemaking trials, we now leave it 12 months on the lees so that it gains some complexity and we are pretty happy with the result. Once we had gotten to a place where we could try something new, well, why not a sparkler?". Pavan stops for a moment and seems lost in thought "... but it's cold sensitive though..... but you know what? You can always harvest it in early October and at other times after that and so you can make wines at different stages of ripeness, and blend thereafter for a final mix of real interest". Cave Spring also makes a lovely Gewurztraminer, but Angelo is not as convinced about gewurz, at least not for his estate, saying "... an older vineyard we bought had been planted in the 80s, but the result wasn't as good as we would have liked and we have since replanted it. One good thing about it is that, at least here in Niagara, it seems that if you let it hang it doesn't lose its aromatics, but overall it's tough going here. It really needs cool weather and a long fall, plus it's a very sensitive variety. We're happy with the results, but it accounts for only 2 to 4 acres of our 125 total, and we probably won't be replanting it".

Clearly Angelo is a real Riesling expert and he feels blessed to be working with the terroir of the Beamsville Bench: "Absolutely, there is no such Bench in eastern Niagara, so this is really a top site for Riesling. Here it expresses bright citrus aromas and flavours, at least when fermented dry. Instead in the middle range of residual sugars, like for example 8-13 g/L you get more of the spices and poached pear, while at 16 g/L or more the peach and apricot really come through. Don't misunderstand, I think that the Rieslings from Niagara-on-the-Lake are just fine, but they don't age as well as ours, and are certainly more floral. No surprise though, as the soils there are light and sandy. However, I feel riesling wants a little clay... at least, it helps build more body and structure and I prefer my wines to be so, but the diversity between wines made in different parts of Niagara is a great plus for us. Our Rieslings are more like those of the Nahe or Pfalz but we're not as warm as the latter; and we're a lot better today t this than even just 10 years ago, so we're hopeful". Different yeasts don't seem to play as big a role according to Pavan "we've changed them many times over but I'm not sure it has mattered much. Instead, I think we need to learn more about canopy management and cellar management".

Cave Spring, like many other wineries in Niagara makes a very good Icewine, but it has always specialized in very successful sweet wines that aren't necessarily as rich and sweet as Icewine. For example, Select Late Harvest (SLH) wines are bottled at about 26-30 Brix, Special Select Late Harvest (SSLH) at 30 or above; the Indian Summer Riesling can be, depending on the vintage, a declassified Special Select or a simpler SLH, but with us, these terms do not refer to wines made from secondary pressings of Icewine (secondary pressing refers to the pressing of frozen grapes

after they have been pressed once to make Icewine) which is the route taken by some other wineries”. Interestingly, Angelo hits upon something that I feel ought to be changed in Niagara: to reduce wines with the prestigious name of LH or SLH or SSLH to wines seen as the second choice juice while the best is used for Icewine, is limiting. Angelo also points out that “Some of the grapes used to make the Indian Summer Riesling are even partially frozen at -6 or -7 °C; the Germans would identify the wine as a gold capsule in such cases. The 1987 was our first ever Indian Summer and that had partially frozen grapes. Actually, we’d like for it to be possible to make a real Auslese most of the time, but it’s not always possible”.

Cave Spring makes a number of different wines, and two of their best vineyards produce the fruit that goes into the top bottlings, labeled CVS and Estate. Planted between 1974-78, there are two adjacent vineyard sites characterized by low yields, and undergo very selective picking during usually two different vineyard passes. The vines used to make the Estate wines are mainly 20 years old, with a third being 8-10 years old, while the CSV wines are made from grapes grown on vines that are 30 year old and more. Of the two, the CSV is usually the bigger wine with residual sugars, between roughly 10-30 g/L, depending on the vintage. “For example, the 2003 had 30 g/L residual sugar and a pH of 2.8, with, believe it or not, a total acidity of 10 g/L, so I left the sugar in to balance the low pH/acidity ratio”.

**Riesling Dolomite 2008 Niagara Escarpment:** Pale straw-yellow, lovely nose of citrus and white flowers, bright and fresh on the palate at first, but then turns a little metallic due to laser-like acidity that nicely lifts the white peach and pink grapefruit flavours. Finishes extremely dry and leaving you to scramble quickly for something to eat. This wine, named for a layer of dolomitic limestone that is generally rare but typical of the Escarpment, is made from a blend of grapes grown mainly in the Weis Vineyard on the Twenty Mile Bench (63%) and the Cave Spring Vineyard on the Beamsville Bench (37%). I actually think this will prove better than the 2007, that I tasted last year and wasn’t too impressed by.

**Riesling 2007 Niagara Peninsula :** Pretty green-straw yellow. Meyer’s lemons on the nose, with lime, pink grapefruit and flint along with aromas of apricot. Rich in the middle, and lovely medium-long finish, fresh and citrusy with only the slightest hint of minerality and a whiff of spiciness. Made from about 70% Weiss clones, this is an excellent wine, with about 16g/L of residual sugar but there’s enough acidity (roughly 6.5 g/L) that you’d never guess the sugar content was that high. Made from roughly 73% Twenty Mile Bench, 17% Lincoln Lakeshore, and 10% Beamsville Bench fruit.

**Riesling Off-Dry 2007:** Bright medium straw-gold. Knock-out nose is highly aromatic, with citrus, poached pear and cinnamon apple aromas. Enters rich and clean, showcasing balanced acids along with sweet spice, baked apple, ripe citrus and mineral flavours. Finishes long and clean, with a resurgence of the aromatic quality. This is even better than the previous wine and would merit an outstanding score, if I were doing that here.

**Riesling Estate 2007 Beamsville Bench:** Bright straw-green and some gold. Perfumed, mineral wine that seems a touch more austere presently than the other Cave Spring wines, but there is real depth to this nose. Pure, clean and fresh, with a beautifully full mid-palate of stones, chalk and fruit, this very long wine has a mineral sheen and lovely ripe citrus, almost oily mouthfeel of tangerine and grapefruit rind oils. Finishes with noticeable grapefruit and spicy notes. In my experience, the Estate wines at Cave Spring are lower in overall phenolics so they tend to age better, but are not as expressive when young. At 13 g/L residual sugar and 8.2 g/L total titratable acidity (and more

importantly, 2.85 pH), this is an absolutely world class Riesling on a par with the best from Germany and Alsace. Made from vines that average about 18 years of age.

**Riesling CVS 2006 Beamsville Bench:** Straw-gold, bright and clear. Very deep, initially austere nose, with a lovely rich white pepper, flinty and citrus set of aromas that are made more interesting by hints of guava and honeysuckle. Fresh bright and long with a ripe juiciness to the lime and apricot flavours, then richer and creamier thanks to ripe yellow plum and more guava notes. Very long and pure. I find the structure here to be typical of CSV Rieslings in general, as the vines are located in an area where there is more groundwater flow than any other part of the escarpment, with many caves and springs. Made from vines that average 32 years of age (selected grapes from 30 and 34 year old vines).

**Chenin Blanc Estate 2007 Beamsville Bench:** Pale straw-green. Typical enough on the nose, deep but not immediately accessible and quite closed, it only hints at smoky and stony aromas, with Golden Delicious apple, yellow plum and even ripe papaya and buttercups emerging on the tail. Lemony and buttery on entry, then very mineral and apparently extremely high in acid, with flavours similar to the aromas. This has a huge aftertaste and a big body, though it lacks the depth of the truly great Chenins of the Loire (but this is made from young vines). Still, there's real personality here, coming in a package of about 11 g/L of residual sugar, and a whopping 7.7 g/l total acidity (and 2.9 pH). My guess is it'll be much better in about three years time, and that you'll be able to enjoy it for another four to six after that, at least, if kept in a decent cellar. Made from a single 2.4 acre (roughly 1 hectare) block of eight year old vines located in the CVS vineyard, so it's really a pretty amazing result for such young vines. I can understand why Angelo wants to insist with the variety.

**Gewurztraminer 2007 Beamsville Bench:** Straw-gold. Lovely, downright excellent nose that actually reminds you of Gewurz in a floral style (not easily obtained outside of Italy and France), delicate and mineral, with plenty of rose petals and orange blossoms. On entry enters surprisingly rich and creamy, with soft sweet spices, but lacks a little acidity, failing to adequately lift the grapefruit, lychee and delicate peach flavours. Only 13% alcohol, a very good thing considering the almost ridiculous alcohol levels reached by its Alsatian and Italian counterparts (a point in its favour, and something Niagara producers need to keep in mind when considering the virtues or flaws of the variety in their terroirs). Also contains about 22 g/L residual sugar, but unfortunately only 5.2 g/L acidity (and a lower than I would have thought 3.2 pH). Made from two distinct parcels of vines located within the CVS vineyard, aged from 14 to 24 years, this is a very successful example of Gewurz, especially if you stop to consider the far too many very unsuccessful Gewurzes made elsewhere in Canada, California, Australia, South Africa and other New World countries.

**Chardonnay Musqué 2007 Beamsville Bench:** Made from two parcels of vines aged 11 through 24 of age, this has a pretty, pale straw yellow hue. Menthol and lime on the nose, with a hint of resin. Fresh and juicy on the palate, this starts crisp, then turns oily, but with a very prominent vegetal streak: this is a little too green for my taste, though I appreciate it's full bodied appeal. In fact, this is probably the richest Musqué they have made here since their very good '97 (a very good. Great even, vintage in Niagara). Finishes with a strong reminder of orange marmelade and grapefruit jam. Musqué is an aromatic clone of chardonnay, which is not an aromatic variety. Angelo likes it, especially appreciating the fact it is not as affected by shadow as some other varieties, making it ideal in some locations unsuited for those.

**Chardonnay CSV 2006 Beamsville Bench:** Medium deep straw. The nose is a little dominated by the oak presently (this is barrel fermented in 60% new oak), but there's an appealing mineral austerity here, complemented by a definite sweetness to the caramel apple and ripe pineapple aromas, further complicated by buttery and hazelnut notes (10 months on the lees). A little too much wood again is present on the palate as well, with a youthfully astringent finish, but it may just need more time since it does have a core of ripe yellow apple and pear flavours, with a lovely hint of crème brûlée and warm buttered toast. Finishes with a welcome hint of stoniness. Angelo tells me they used slightly more new oak than usual but it's very showy presently, probably due to the cool vintage. Made from 29 and 33 year old vines that are located on a particularly gravelly section of the CVS vineyard, and that minerality comes through, albeit delicately, in the wine.

**Pinot Noir CSV 2005 Beamsville Bench:** Medium red. Lovely smoky red cherry and red currant nose here: this is quite a bit better and more varietally accurate, aromatically speaking, than many other New World Pinot Noirs I have tasted recently. Then peppery, spicy, with pretty unripe raspberry and richer red, almost black, cherry flavours, with an enticing black pepper spiciness on the medium long high acid finish. Very well done: if for no other reason, this wine does not rely only on charred oak for its interest factor, the escape hatch of many weak non Burgundy Pinot Noir bottlings. Considering it's made from very young vines that aren't even fifteen years old, there's a lot to be happy about and even better, to look forward to.

**Select Late Harvest Indian Summer Riesling 2006 Beamsville Bench:** Medium deep gold with some hints of amber. Intense honeyed nose hints at peach, apricot, oranges, herbs and quince. Enters fresh and medium sweet, with peach, orange, citrus, and pear flavours, but it finishes somewhat bitter and only medium long. I have had every single Indian Summer ever made and have always enjoyed this wine, but I doubt this version will go down in memory (mine, at least) as one of the better ones. A blend of 70% Lincoln Lakeshore and 30% Beamsville Bench grapes, in a semi-frozen state at the time of pressing as the first deep frosts of winter hit the vineyards with the grapes still hanging on the vines. From 20hL/Ha yields, this wine has about 8.9 g/l residual acidity and 90 g/L residual sugar, but even though it's luscious and sweet enough, I think it might have had more appeal with a little more sugar. Then again, I might be catching it at an awkward stage of development.

*Some older vintages recently tasted I have especially liked:*

**Riesling CVS 2002:** Bright medium deep straw-green. Delicate peach and pear aromas are lifted by licorice and a hint of mushroom. Long and fairly full bodied. Cave Spring also made an excellent Dry Riesling in the 2002 vintage and the Off-dry Bottling was also very good.

**Chardonnay Musqué 2002:** Medium straw with hints of gold. Intense spicy nose hints at lemon grass, pine resin, and ripe bananas. Fairly rich on the palate, this big and rather bold wine will either win you over or leave you wondering with it's almost oily, tropical fruit and spice flavours of lime, banana and chamomile. I am not a fan of Musqué, but this seems to me to be the best made from

this variety that I have tasted from anywhere (we make a little of it in Italy too, with even less success). In fact, the only other Musqué of note I recall is Cave Sprng's very great 1997 bottling, which was also their first.

**Chardonnay CVS 2000:** Medium deep gold. Ripe yellow fruit on the nose, and mercifully, no hint of the overoakiness all too common in so many Chardonnay wood bombs that hold appeal to wine ignoramuses. Medium to full bodied on the palate, with pretty candied pineapple and banana flavours, and a subtle touch of oak on the medium long, high acid but balanced finish.

**Chenin Blanc Icewine 2002:** Medium deep straw-gold. Aromas of quince, lime and lemons soar from the glass, enlivened by a herbal twist. Plenty of acidity here to clean the palate and leave the mouth feeling fresh and clean with lingering citrus, stone apple and thyme flavours. This was a real curiosity for me when I first tried it years ago, as there aren't too many Icewines made from the variety; it's still holding up well enough.

**Riesling Icewine 2001:** Fairly deep gold. Intense peach and rosemary aromas, then nectarine, n̄honey and minerals. Refreshing and long, with a syrupy sweetness that is enlivened by naturally high yet balanced acidity. Long and still doing well when coming from a good cellar.

#### **DANIEL LENKO ESTATE WINERY**

[www.daniellenko.com](http://www.daniellenko.com)

You've got to like a winery where the "harvesting consultant" is a dog: specifically, Blackie (the fifth, no less), a very likable, happy Border Collie who only eats the grapes when they are perfectly ripe. In Italy we have wild boars who do just as a good a job, but I'm inclined to believe most everyone would prefer to have Blackie around instead of a relative of warthogs.

This is one of Canada's, not just Niagara's, finest wineries: certainly it belongs in the top half dozen or so. It doesn't hurt it any that it owns Canada's (again, not just Niagara's) oldest chardonnay and merlot vines, and the riesling, planted in 1980, isn't that young either (by Canadian standards). Success has been such here, in the form of both awards and sales, that they now only sell their wines at the winery or via mailing lists.

The winery was officially launched in 1959 when it brought in 2000 chardonnay vines from France, thanks to incessant demand from the Parkdale winery through which the Lenko family used to sell its grapes. In 1960 they planted another 3000 vines, as Bright's wanted to try new things and as owner Bill Lenko had found he couldn't sell his other crops well every year ("already in 1957 I had about 15 acres of Concord grapes I couldn't sell"), and so he decided to plant something that he could move each year, and grapes were much in demand. Actually, the Lenko family has a long tradition of fruit growing, and used to grow Duchess and Elvira apples, though they started growing grapes, mainly Concord, already in 1947: and on the subject of grapes, they used to cull even 12 tons per acre, instead of the 2 tons per acre of today. "It's simple math" laughs Daniel Lenko, son of founder Bill Lenko "... rather than make wines from five tons per acre and sell it at four dollars a bottle, better to make wines from two tons per acre and sell them at \$25 a bottle!!

Daniel is now running the show, having taken over the winemaking duties from his father Bill in 1998, and then establishing the winery in 1999. So the progression was only natural, from Bill, one of the truly important and gifted pioneers of fruit growing in Niagara, to Daniel, an equally talented young man who now oversees everything. Born in the Ukraine in 1935, Bill Lenko moved to

Canada but in order to immigrate needed to post a \$1000 bond and to go live on a farm (and only got his money back then) north of Winnipeg in Canada's cold Manitoba province ("It wasn't all bad" recalls smiling Bill "you can grow a better, more flavourful potato there than you can here"). He lived there until 1947, then sold everything and moved to the Niagara area because his sister lived in Toronto. His brother was also getting married at the time and so they looked to get into business together: initially, their original idea was to buy a dairy farm, but ended up buying a fruit farm instead, which was brutal going in the early years. "I had to set pins at a local bowling alley for 4 cents a game because I couldn't afford to do anything with the fruit farm, not go to a show or a dance, nothing. You want to know how cold it was? Well, my father was a smoker and he knew which way the wind was blowing outside just by sitting in the house: there was no insulation back then!".

A thin, fit-looking older gentleman who makes wonderful fruit preserves and jams in his spare time (some for which have won awards), Bill's greatest claim to fame is his eponymously named Lenko vineyard, which may well be the one Grand Cru site of Ontario everyone can agree on.

A total of 34 acres today (or 13 hectares), it is divided up into two parcels, the home farm and the "other farm", as Daniel jokingly refers to it (this portion is 5 acres) on a clay-loam base. Merlot and viognier are grown on the latter, while merlot, chardonnay, riesling, cabernet franc and cabernet sauvignon form the other 29 acres that surround the farm. In 1975, Bill uprooted all of his remaining Concord ("we got tired of waiting around for people to buy our other grapes") and planted four hectares of merlot. Along with the very old chardonnay vines, these old merlot vines account for the depth and complexity of many of the Lenko wines, especially the top bottlings. The very cold winter of 1980, the equivalent in Niagara of 1956 in Pomerol, killed off a number of the vines, but enough remained to give Lenko wines that something extra other Niagara wines lack. Mention 1980 and Bill Lenko has painful memories: he says "No doubt: the toughest year we had to endure was 1980, cold, freezing weather caused one third of the merlot to freeze and die, another third was damaged, and one third survived, but we never replanted, and have never used any herbicides or commercial fertilizers". Jim Warren, one of the more important figures in Niagara's winemaking history, and a successful winemaking consultant, made a number of very great, award winning wines with fruit purchased from the Lenko vineyard. An though he consulted longtime with Daniel as well, recently young Ilya Semchuck has moved in, hired by Daniel out of Brock University. Says Lenko: "I trained under Jim Warren, who took us to a certain, very great, level, but I wanted to build a more varietal character in my wines and that's what we are trying to do now, to allow the grape's varietal personality and the soil's characteristics to show through more, if possible. I'll use even seven months of lees contact, and no malolactic is done so we have plenty of green apple aromas and flavours. All these non-malo wines seem to suffer from a hollow mid-palate, but stirring of the lees helps out".

Not a shy or modest man whom I had the pleasure of meeting recently alongside his father in their home's kitchen, Daniel is fashioning some remarkable wines, all characterized by big bold structures and that show very good aging potential. I find that the oak-aged wines all show an oakiness on the nose that is especially pronounced at about 10-11 months of bottle age, but dissipates soon after that.

There are however many different bottlings to choose from, and a little homework is necessary for you to know exactly what it is you're buying. Taking Chardonnay as an example, the Old Block parcel of grapes go into the Old Vines bottlings, that can be aged in both European and US oak, while the young vines (keeping in mind that at Lenko, differently than with many other Canadian producers, this can mean vines that have been planted in the 80s or earlier) are used for the unoaked Chardonnay bottling. Lenko feels his wines can last even up to 10 years in French oak,

only seven when the wine is aged in the US oak, after which he feels the wine gets resinous. Last but not least, the best grapes of all at Lenko are used for the Signature Blue Label wines, that are only made every 2-3 years. For example, no such wines were made in either 2006 or 2008. Also noteworthy, and something that speaks volumes about this winery, is that at Lenko they price per vintage quality, so wines from those vintages that are perceived as tops will cost more from the outset, and viceversa. Last but not least, Lenko winery is also known for the production, in some years, of atypical, almost quixotic wines such as white or rosé wines from grapes such as cabernet sauvignon. "Listen" laughs Daniel "better to make a white cabernet or a good rosé rather than a bad red! You get lemons, you make lemonade". Lenko has had enormous success with Chardonnay and Merlot, and makes a very good Riesling and Viognier as well. He also owns one hectare of gewurztraminer, but Daniel feels the right soil is absolutely key for the variety in Niagara "If it's too wet it doesn't do well, and even with drains in place it has trouble... so I think you look where the air circulates, such that it's less moist, and there we seem to have a better shot with the variety".

**Riesling Reserve 2007:** Pretty straw-green hue. Lovely minerality and fresh white peach, grapefruit and even a hint of lilac aromas soar from the glass, then gains in complexity with yeasty, almond notes. Long and lithe with a laser-like core of balanced acidity underpinning the similar fruit flavours to the aromas. Well done. "The Reserve monicker just helps it sell better" Daniel smiles. This has 12 g/l residual sugar and 8.5 g/l total acidity.

**Chardonnay Unoaked 2007:** Pale straw-green. Lovely fresh Chablis-like nose with hints of honey coated minerals and rocks, minty apples, pears and flowers. Slight residual sweetness on the palate, which gives it a pleasantly smooth, round mouthfeel, with crisp green apple and citrus fruit flavours resonating brightly on the rather long finish that help it avoid coming across as flabby or dull.

**Chardonnay 2006:** medium straw-green. Very yeasty, green apple, eau de vie like quality to the aromas on the impressive nose. Enters fat and rich, with intense apple and pear flavours and a sweet, long honeyed finish

**Viognier 2007:** Very pale, enters nicely then simple, but with plenty of apricot, papaya, peach and orange blossom aromas and flavours, with plenty of mouthwatering natural acidity. Made from grapes planted in 1993, this has a Condrieu-like nose and some textural richness derived from sitting on lees for seven months. "Again" Daniel tells me "the problem with the variety is the tonnage, it just has to be less than two tons per acre. And I don't like to use oak with it, for it ends up tasting just like chardonnay. Not all the berries ripen evenly, so some I pick at 20 Brix, others at 26 Brix, but they average out in the end".

**Viognier 2006:** Medium straw yellow. Very pure, mineral, nose that is less marked by peachy aromas, but rather more neutral fruit such as starfruit, and closes with a pretty tea leaf and flinty quality. Full and fresh, mineral and long, hints of dried apricot and jasmine, also citrus. Lenko told me that people in Canada "... don't think that the '06 wines are any good but they need to taste them, 2007 was better only because it was a little warmer, and so the wines come across with a bit more flesh and body".

**Chardonnay Old Vines '04 French oak:** Medium straw-gold. Still very fresh, lovely Puligny-like quality to the nose redolent of minerals and citrus aromas, with hints of unripe banana. More banana and minerals on the palate, with a sweet vanilla and fleshy mouthfeel along with an enticing powdered rock quality on the long smooth finish. Lenko tells me "... we like the 96 clone of chardonnay, but we also have the Musqué. The '04 is a great vintage for us, in fact we also made a blue signature wine this year".

**Chardonnay Blue Signature Series 2005:** Medium deep straw yellow with some gold. Nice lightly spicy oak on the nose, with lovely mineral, green apple and pineapple aromas, this is long and very pure, quite Burgundy like and showing a deft use of oak. Made from 100% old vines in what was a very difficult vintage, preceded by a very cold winter, then plagued by a very hot summer, the old vines are the only ones that responded well. This saw 16-19 months of oak (of which 60% new). “We’re trying to make our own style of chardonnay “ interjects Lenko “and though of course I am happy with a Burgundy equivalent, we’re different and want our Chardonnays to be recognized as such. For example, our nose is bigger and more showy, while our palate is usually tighter. I’d also say we are less aromatically challenged and have brighter fruit aromas”.

**Meritage 2005:** Medium deep red, with some ruby. Warm aromas of cassis and blackberry syrup, with a hint of spices at the back. Richer on the palate than the nose suggested, it has an appealing pepperiness along with ripe blackberry and plum flavours, as well as a green streak on the finish. Youthfully chewy tannins that are polished and smooth. An 83% cabernet sauvignon and 17% merlot blend, this is not made every year (while at Lenko they may make a Merlot every year, and then only an Old Vine Merlot). “I think some of the greenness has to be there” states Lenko “for it’s typical of the reds we make here in Niagara, at least from these grape varieties. Let’s face it, the need to eliminate that green streak, which if not excessive is not at all unpleasant, only leads to the use of spinning cones and the likes, to that sort of interventionist winemaking I am not a fan of and don’t respect”.

## **HENRY OF PELHAM FAMILY ESTATE WINERY**

[www.henryofpelham.com](http://www.henryofpelham.com)

For the longest time I have felt that no other winery in Canada, with the exception of Cave Spring Cellars, understood Riesling the way they do at Henry of Pelham. Quite simply, their versions have always had a Mosel-like laciness that few in Niagara ever managed to capture, and their Riesling Icewine was always, to my taste, the best of them all. I still remember some truly amazing Riesling Icewines from this estate from the ‘90s, about as good, if in a different style, than many of the top names from Germany. Then again, that they are uniquely gifted with white varieties was also driven home to me over the years by some lovely late harvest Seyvals they have made over the years, not at all an easy undertaking. Again, progress in Niagara winemaking has been such that there are many other wineries now making great, world class Riesling, but still today, when Henry of Pelham gets it right their Rieslings, and especially the Icewine, are not to be missed.

Henry of Pelham is intimately linked to the Speck family, and you’ll be hard pressed to meet nicer people in the world of wine anywhere. Paul Speck Sr. bought the property in 1982, and by 1984 had bought enough parcels of vines and planted new ones for a total of 65 acres, enough to start planning a winery. Located near St. Catharines, the first official Henry of Pelham vintage was 1984. Though the winery was started by Paul Speck Sr. it is important to recognize the role his three children had in turning it into the successful operation it is today. In fact, fulltime involvement in the winery came upon his male heirs with, unfortunately, their father’s illness: Paul Jr., for example, was in his early twenties and planning to study law, when he was essentially forced to put those thoughts on the backburner and devote himself to the winery fulltime. Today, brothers Paul, Matthew and Daniel are accomplished, successful winery owners with numerous achievements to their credit: for instance, Matthew won the coveted title of Grape King in 2000 (a prestigious viticultural award of Ontario), Daniel is in charge of the excellent sales team and results, and Paul

has been past Chairman of the Wine Council of Ontario. A fourth member of the team, and one who has been with the Specks since 1989, is winemaker Ron Giesbrecht, a graduate of Guelph University. On one day I visited, Ron had just come back from a trip visiting wineries in France.

In the end, it was meant to be. The Specks had been associated with this property since the XVIIth century, and in fact, the estate itself was bought from a cousin, Neil Smith (while Nicholas Smith had started it all back in 1794, rewarded with the property for his role and dedication during the American War of Independence). Though Canada was in the midst of the brutal recession of the early 80s, Speck Sr. decided to plant at a time when everyone else was ripping up vines, something that ensures Henry of Pelham owns many older vines, on average, than most other Niagara wineries, and therein lies part of the secret of their success. The somewhat strange name of the estate derives from another ancestor, Henry, who built an inn on the grounds in 1842; and when he was awarded his liquor licence, he signed it as one Henry of Pelham. Even more curious is the fact that there was an English Prime Minister of the same name, though the winery was not named in his honour.

On a visit last year to the winery, I spent a wonderful morning listening and learning while moving about their modest, cottage like winery. I was relieved not to be in the usual mega-cathedral to wine architecture so common nowadays in many different parts of the wine world (most of which seem never to make very interesting wines). Paul seems to be reading my mind when he says: "Like everyone here in Niagara, we're terroir obsessed, and so we try hard to stay true to the authenticity of our wines and terroirs. For us, that's what counts most. You can't build a winery or a "process" that might pay off in the short run with the media or the less than dedicated public. Those change! So to say you're charging \$40 for your wine because of the gravity feeds and all the other super expensive investments you made in the winery building... not good. Think of how cement vats have come and gone and are now coming back again".

Their first ever vintage at Henry of Pelham was the 1988, and after a few years at it they hired winemaker Sandrine Epp from Toulouse in late 1997 or early 1998 "to help us get to the next level" as Paul says. In reality, this estate has always done things very well and with quality as an objective: Paul is also on the board at VQA, and he and Len Pennacchetti of Cave Spring Cellars, amongst others as well, really pushed for it and were extremely happy when it went through in '03.

A recent Riesling retrospective of their wines I was holding in my cellar didn't surprise me much; the wines were generally superb. Interestingly, I found that some of the wines made in the cooler vintages performed less well than some of the wines made in warmer years, though I am not sure why that might be. I inquired what his thoughts might be on the subject. "That's funny, we did a similar tasting ourselves recently and we also went in thinking that the cooler years would prove better, but not so. The best of the lot was the 1995, when the grapes were hit by a bit of botrytis, and I'll admit it was an undoubtedly flashy wine. The '91, '98, '02, and '03 were all fine, and oddly enough I like our '06 as well though it rained". I asked about the 2007, which I think is as close to an outstanding wine as there may be, and he responds " I think 2007 is a phenomenal Riesling year".

At Henry of Pelham, they make mainly Riesling, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Baco Noir and Pinot Noir, and both dry, sweet, and sparkling wines of real note. There are, as is the case with most Niagara wineries, a series of different lines of wines. The Speck Family reserve wines come only from fruit from the Short Hills Bench, where they own their oldest vines that have extra low yields., while the Reserve wines can be a blend of Beamsville and Short Hills Bench fruit. Baco Noir and Chardonnay are their two important commercial wines. There are roughly 75,000 total cases

produced a year, and most are divided up between 15,000 of chardonnay, 19,000 of Baco, and 13,000 of Riesling. Their most recent addition to the line-up is a sparkling wine, 4,000 cases in total. I have always liked Henry of Pelham's white wines best, but the estate also makes some very good red wines, and in particular a smashingly delightful Baco Noir, in both a base and a Reserve version. The latter is an outstanding, amazingly appealing wine for the money. Instead, they're not usually seen as the biggest of Pinot Noir specialists, something of an anomaly given that it is the premier red grape of Niagara. "We've been making it since 1990 but originally only in very small quantities, the '98 was our first great year, then we feel that the '02, '99 –generally a great year for reds here in Niagara- turned out very well. Of the more recent vintages, we're very happy with '05 and '07.

The estate now owns about 175 acres and, in a typical example of how they work at Henry of Pelham, had a geologist from Brock University zone out their various land possessions, then called on super expert Tony Shaw to do a climatic study of the various vineyards. "So today we have accumulated a wealth of knowledge about the various sub-zones of Niagara and we can make better wines because of this. For example, the Short Hills Bench is not as steep as the Beamsville Bench, and so that will translate into the wines. We're located at the shoreline" Paul pauses and smiles as if a thought has suddenly hit him "in fact, a very long time ago, Pelham rd., where the winery is found, used to be the old shoreline... we're at a point where the rolling hills have a lot of sedimentary shale and blue heavy clay and some very fine sediment. It's the warmest sub-appellation of the main Bench, and the coldest area of them all in the winter, which explains why we produce a lot of icewine. Still, it's too early to really know and understand all the differences between our many various sub-zones... my kids will be able to though" he smiles "Of course, some generalizations are already possible, even at our present state of knowledge. For example, the wines from the Beamsville Bench usually have higher acidities and minerality and the wines of the area around Niagara-on-the-Lake, due to sandier soils, often leads to increased productions with softer more floral wines".

About 70% of the fruit with which they make the wines is estate grown, but the Specks also have long term contracts with two growers they trust and have an excellent rapport with (one in Niagara-on-the-Lake, the other in the Beamsville area). The rootstocks are for the most part SO4 due to the high clay content of their soils, and curiously enough, at least in my experience is that Paul tells me that "... we actually find that the roots manage to go down fairly deep, plus it weathers the cold much better than other rootstocks. So here in Niagara, it's a pretty commonly used rootstock".

I ask him what he thinks is the single greatest thing about Canada's, and specifically Niagara's, wines. "In my view, the great thing is we're focusing on the right varieties. Ours is a Continental climate, so we make wines that can age. We don't make jammy wines and that's a good thing as our customers have matured as well, they just don't want that style of wine anymore; but let me tell you, ten years ago, it was a much tougher sell" he smiles "For example, at Henry of Pelham we focus on only a few varieties: even though it's fairly hot right now in the marketplace, Sauvignon Blanc is really only a secondary wine for us".

**Cuvée Catherine Brut:** A 70% chardonnay and 30% pinot noir blend, this spent 30 months on its lees. Good medium straw-gold hue. Very fresh, immensely appealing nose is citrusy and toasty, with sneaky complexity in its floral and fruit aromatics. Enters very bright and fresh on the palate, with intense citrus and ripe apple flavours, with a pretty clean finish that is long and has a lingering minerally-apple note. A very good sparkling wine indeed, Paul jokes that they were forced to make it since "...the three wives were bugging us to make a sparkler, and so we gave it a female name".

**Cuvée Catherine Rosé Brut:** a blend of 70% pinot noir and 30% chardonnay, pretty very pale pink salmon hue that exhibit delicate strawberry-rhubarb and floral aromas on the nose. Then lighter and less intense on the palate than the nose might have suggested, with pretty red berry and cherry flavours of modest intensity and some noticeable residual sweetness. A solid sparkling rosé made in a modern, not-so-complicated style.

**Riesling Reserve 2007:** Medium straw-green. Very keroseny, typical of a hot year yet has enough genteel floral, apple, and herbal aromas to keep it from being heavy. Surprisingly acidic on the palate, with ripe tropical fruit and ginger flavours, this has a long stony-lemony honey finish, with a lingering hint of smoky peachy. About 5-6% of the fruit is from the Beamsville bench; 7 g/l total acidity, 8.6 g/l residual sugar, harvested mid to late October. Made from selected vineyards, many of the estate, the grapes were harvested between September 29 and October 25, 2007, with yields of about 35-50 hL/Ha (roughly between 2 to 3 tonnes per acre). I appreciate the fact that many in Canada feel 2007 to be a great vintage, but if the aromatics in the Rieslings are going to be this obvious and evolved, I'm not as impressed.

**Riesling Off Dry Reserve 2007:** Pretty green-gold hue. Knockout nose is crammed with aromas of cinnamon, talc and ginger lime, complicated by warm cinnamon apple pie notes. Then very sweet on entry, with good precision to the sexy ripe grapefruit, apple and tangerine flavours. Not as complex as the Reserve but an immensely pleasant wine with a welcome finishing sweetness and enough acidity to keep it light, lively and interesting. About 18 g/l residual sugar, 7.1 g/l total acidity, and made all from Short Hills Bench fruit that was late harvested (October 13-19) and higher-than-I-would-have-imagined yields of 50-70 hL/Ha, but therein lies one of the true great features of riesling. This is also an exceptionally good buy and a great value, considering it sold for about \$CDN 15 originally. A great restaurant wine if there is any!

**Riesling Speck Family Reserve 2007:** Medium straw-green with hints of gold. Refined nose is much less heat affected than the '07 Reserve wine. Pretty aromas of quince, lime, jasmine and peach that are ripe but not jammy and there's only a hint of underlying, developing, minerality. Enters smooth and fresh, with good freshness to the pure citrus and riper tropical fruit flavours. Long and pure, excellent. The vines for this wine were all planted in 1984; 275 cases made only, unfortunately. The 2002 vintage is the only one in which they made all four wines, and no Family Reserve was made in '05 and '06. The first vintage made was in 1998, this was made from grapes harvested between October 11 – 14 and may well be one of the best dry Rieslings ever made by Henry of Pelham, at least to my taste (they have made only three Family Reserve Rieslings, the first being in 2002). The vines were planted back in 1984, and the yields range between 45-55 hL/Ha, all details that come through loud and clear when tasting this gorgeous wine. Total acidity of 8.5 g/L and 11.8 g/L residual sugar.

**Chardonnay non oaked 2007:** Medium deep straw-gold. Amazing licorice component on nose, Then anise, ripe Golden Delicious apples and pear. Enters fleshy and warm, then a little lean, with a crisp green apple on the finish. This is quite Chablis like but a little hollow in mid palate range. The wine was originally called Sur Lies, as it usually stays about six months on the lees, but they have opted for a simpler, more direct name. Made from a blend of Short Hills Bench and grapes bought

from the two growers. Actually, when you stop to consider the less than impressive variables at work here, such as the yield of about 2-4.5 tons per acre, bought fruit from two growers (albeit good ones) and from vines that average only about 10 years in age, this has truly amazing potential and I am excited to see how it might develop over the next twenty years as the vines mature. An example of just how good, and there are many others, non-oaked, stainless steel fermented Chardonnay can be in Niagara.

**Chardonnay Speck Family Reserve 2007:** Bright medium deep gold. Fairly oaky nose at first needs a little time in the glass to display its ripe yellow fruit and some pretty caramel spice notes. More refined and less obviously oaky on the palate, this is quite pure with pretty roast banana, crème brûlée and a pretty minerally, citrus finish of considerable length. Above average quality Chardonnay with mercifully restrained buttery oak notes; it's strength is that the almost 14 months new oak (barrel fermented in 60% new oak and 40% one year old barrels) passes by without hitting you across the palate with a two-by-four like far too many new World great-white-wine- wannabees tend to do. This also exhibits the licorice quality of the previous wine on the pretty finish.

**Baco Noir 2007:** Bright purple-deep red. Delicate, almost faint nose of red cherries and peppery plums. A little lean and light on entry, though I like its juicy fruitiness. Finishes short with only modest complexity. Harvested on September 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, with yields around 70 hL/Ha (roughly 4 tonnes/acre), stainless steel fermented, then about 6-8 months in American oak.

**Baco Noir Reserve 2006:** Medium ruby. Deep, complex nose with hints of smoke, raspberry, red cherry jam and plenty of black pepper. Then chewy and nicely textured, with plenty of ripe fruit flavours similar to the aromas and a rather long, flavourful finish. They have a real winner here: this elegant, medium bodied wine has the fruitiness of a good Pinot Noir and the smoky pepperiness of an above average Zinfandel, but is more chewy and creamy than the former and much more elegant than the latter. This is made from very old vines (and it shows, or rather, tastes like it) planted back in 1984 and harvested between September 9-october 6, the wine is aged for about fifteen months in a combination of new and one and two year old barrels of America oak.

**Riesling Icewine 2007:** Pretty bright medium straw-gold. Absolutely fascinating nose of peaches and dried apricots, with underlying candied ginger and floral aromas for added complexity. Enters concentrated and intense in its tropical fruit flavours and ripe minerality, though this still needs considerable time in the bottle to develop a little more complexity. Silky sweet and very fresh. I love this! A wine made in the typical Henry of Pelham Icewine mode, less thick and cloying than those made by many other Niagara wineries. About 9.5% alcohol and 1500-2000 cases made of a wine that sports about 9 g/L total acidity and an eye popping 265 g/L residual sugar. "We don't go for the power" says Paul "and choose to pick at around 34 Brix so it's not overly opulent". Harvested at between -8 to -13° C, from November 24, 2007 to January 31, 2008, and the usual eyedropper type yields of 15 hL/Ha.

*Some older vintages I have recently tasted and especially liked:*

**Riesling Off-Dry 2002:** Bright medium straw-green. Intense, and very typical, aromas of lime and minerals give way to a medium-bodied wine of real finesse that starts off creamy and almost sweet but finishes long, pure and almost dry. Well done.

**Chardonnay Reserve 2002:** Bright medium straw. Fruit-forward nose of bananas, Golden delicious apples and pear aromas, while a delicate, balanced touch of oak comes through on the

palate to help reinforce the fruit flavours, similar to the aromas, with some welcome structure. Finishes clean and with a welcome touch of minerality.

**Riesling dry 1997:** Bright golden hue. Licorice, raisins and terpenic on the nose with a pretty hint of dried apricots and canned peaches. Still holding up on the palate, this is lovely, still remarkably acid but enough body, lime, quince, and marzipan flavours to make it extremely appealing. Slightest hint of oxidation begins to develop quickly with air in the glass. A textbook example of how well Niagara Riesling can age.

**Cabernet-Merlot Speck Family Reserve 2002:** Medium deep ruby with a very slight pale rim. Lovely nose with pure cassis, cedar and graphite aromas, this could be easily mistaken for a high quality Graves red. Downright fantastic on entry, very elegant, this still needs time to fully express its ripe red cherry, blackberry syrup and vanilla flavours. Finishes with a hint of dryish wood tannins but closes elegant and sweet. Very well done, this shows just what is possible even with cab and merlot in Niagara, and I'm not believer of these two varieties for the region (cab franc is a different story).

## **HIDDEN BENCH VINEYARDS AND WINERY**

[www.hiddenbench.com](http://www.hiddenbench.com)

It is a sure fire sign of just how far Niagara's wines have come in a very short span of time that one of the region's better, up-and-coming wineries, Hidden Bench, wasn't even around when Tony Aspler, Canada's best winewriter and one of only about thirty truly great wine writers in the world, wrote his seminal book, *Vintage Canada* (published in 1999). Of German descent, lawyer Harald Thiel fell in love with wine thanks to his grandfather's finely stocked wine cellar, and then spent the next part of his work life with the intent to be able to one day buy his own winery. With Hidden Bench Vineyards and Winery, he has been extremely successful and many of the wines have garnered both critical and public acclaim. Interestingly, though he loves Pinot Noir and the Meritage blends, I feel some of his best wines are the Rieslings and Gewurztraminer. This, by the way, is one of the wineries that is not making any Icewine currently, as they ripped out all their Vidal wines and don't plan to make a Riesling Icewine for now.

At Hidden Bench, they believe in sustainable vineyard management practices and low yields, plus terroir driven wines, so much so that they produce a Terroir Series of wines that are downgraded in those years in which the characteristics of the soil do not come through.

The first vineyard was purchased in 2003, is called Locust Lane and is their home vineyard, as it is located right around the winery. In reality, one should view this as two separate vineyards altogether, an eastern block first planted in 1998 (though it now contains a very thin strip of 777 Pinot Noir planted in 2005), and a western block that was replanted in 2004, at a much higher density (roughly 2500 vines per acre). It is planted to a bunch of different varieties, including riesling, chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc (clone 214 on Riparia, no less), pinot noir (with a very interesting mix of clones such as 114, 667, 777, 115, 386 and even Lenko vines!), merlot, and even syrah.

A second vineyard, called Rosemel, about twenty-six acres large, was bought in 2004 and is found about six kilometers from the winery. Most important, this real jewel was first planted in 1976 by Roman Prydatkewycz, who only slowly agreed to award it to Thiel and Hidden Bench; and in fact, many of the clones planted so long ago are in fact unknown to the winemaking team. This is the site from which come the grapes for most of the top wines of the estate, including the Vieilles Vignes Chardonnay, the Roman's Block Riesling (so named in honour of Prydatkewycz), as well as the Nuit Blanche and La Brunante bottlings.

In 2007, a third vineyard was bought, called Felseck (which means corner of the cliff), located where the Niagara escarpment takes a sudden turn from an east/west direction to a north/south one. Hence the name bestowed upon it, which is also the name of the owners' former country home back in Germany. Bought in 2007, it is about 45 acres, with 15 acres currently under vine, the rest being replanted at much higher densities than before. It is in the 15 acres under vine that you will find the two parcels of gewurztraminer, planted back in 2003 (clone 47 on 3309) that has given rise to some fairly amazing wines of late, and that hints at being a rare and superb spot for this variety in Niagara. While the Rosemel vineyard has a relatively high clay content, the Felseck has relatively more silt and gravel. However, the soil composition is quite complex: for example, at Hidden Bench they point out that the Felseck vineyard, planted in '99, actually has five different soils and tends to give much more floral, rounder wines.

Jean-Martin Bouchard is the winemaker at Hidden Bench and his wines seem to be reaping much critical and public acclaim. There are now a total of 75 acres to work from. All the vines were bought from French nurseries, and of the "newer" varieties they have tried at Hidden Bench, viognier seems to be promising "So much so that we have gone from making 2-4 barriques to fifteen, while syrah is more difficult, as it suffers from winter kill" concludes Bouchard. They are trying different clones, so that the Riesling planted in the Rosemel vineyard is of two different clones, the Johannisburg and the 21B. At Hidden Bench they like the latter's tendency to give more lime, mineral, and tangerine aromas and flavours, and a relatively classic and austere wine.

Vigour can be a problem at Hidden Bench, and so they tend to use Bordeaux's very low vigour Riparia rootstocks. "In years such as 2007 there were considerable problems with drought though: we had to drop a lot of fruit, the only other alternative would have been to irrigate. "For us" Bouchard tells me "Riesling is all about purity, but though Niagara Riesling has purity in spades, it's still going to be a very different wine than those of the Mosel or Alsace. I can't make Alsatian wines here because I don't have their climate and I can't reach 14.5% alcohol, so I'll never make, at least in that respect, a Zind Humbrecht-like wine. And there's no point trying. With Chardonnay or ours Sauvignon - Semillon blend called and Nuit Blanche I think we're getting instead to a much larger degree of volume and ripeness, but I still want to make elegant, food friendly wines the alcohol of which isn't going to put you to sleep".

He also believes, like many making wine in Niagara today, to have been blessed with the many different terroirs they have to work with. "I think it's important to divide up the vineyards parcel by parcel and let the terroir speak. Our Pinot Noirs, for example, can be very similar yet they are all different. Sure, what we lack in Niagara, and Canada in general, is truly old vines: I can try tightening up the rows, but the end result, well, it's never as good as that given by old vines planted tightly way back when. And of course we'll throw the whole arsenal at the vineyard in an effort to increase complexity and richness in the wines....Bud removal, shoot thinning, leaf plucking and

leaf harvesting all things done regularly now, which have all helped improve our wines, but Niagara's best is yet to come. It's really a matter of time, but I'm confident". I interrupt to query about clones: surely they're not the panacea that some would like them to be, but, with Pinot Noir for example, it surely means something if you have a parcel full of Wadenswill as opposed to newer Dijon clones. "Of course, you can't get around that. We tend to use the 667, 777, 828, and others still, but I believe that ultimately terroir and rootstocks are far more important than clones. I can agree with this view: having tasted barrel samples of Pinot Noirs made from grapes grown in different vineyards, the differences jump out: while the Locust Lane vineyard yields fatter, perhaps less charming wines but with lots of fruit that tend to come across as a little austere at first, the Felseck Pinot Noir is anything but austere, fruit forward and ripe and very charming. "Another example of the studying and learning we have to do with our terroirs is shown by our Gewurz, which has the potential for true greatness, but the problem in Canada is achieving consistency: one year it's good, the next it's great, and the following three it's terrible. That may have to do with clones, but I think it has more to do to choosing the right soil and microclimate for it".

**Riesling Estate 2008:** Pale straw green. Lovely citrus, lime, green apple aromas. Enters sweet and floral on the palate, then displays nice lift to the fruit and mineral flavours that have a lovely hint of honeyed sweetness. Just a touch short but a very pretty wine. Made from grapes selected from the three vineyards and harvested between October 1-20, this sports a total acidity of 9.7 g/l and 10.7 g/L residual sugar with a pH of 2.92.

**Riesling Estate 2007:** Pale green-straw. Perfumed, forward nose is redolent of kerosene and lime, but also ripe yellow fruit and delicate hints of tropical notes reminiscent of papaya and lychee. More approachable than the '06 version on the palate, this is creamier and softer with riper fruit flavours. The '07 is obviously made from a much warmer vintage than the '06, with the very showy hydrocarbon nose and heavier, sweeter rounder soft appeal, but still comes across as tart. Made with grapes from all three vineyards, though most of the fruit for this wine came from the Locust Lane vineyard planted in '97. Roughly 8 g/l total acidity, 7.8 g/l residual sugar, and a pH of 2.96, the latter datum telling you much that you need to know about Niagara Riesling!

**Chardonnay Estate 2007 :** Medium-light straw yellow hue. Floral, forward nose is less complex than the '08 tasted out of barrel but very appealing. Enters fat but not blowsy, with good lift and definition to the pretty citrus and banana flavours. Decent length and complexity in what is a very successful wine.

**Pinot Noir Estate 2007 :** Bright medium red. Lovely fruit presence is somewhat in hiding initially on the reticent nose, then opens with a lovely bright flourish of red berries and smoky plums. Very fresh and pure, with delicate red berry flavours, this finishes salty and high in acid that raises the palate's awareness of the still youthful tannins. An archetypal cool temperature Pinot Noir that is altogether typical of what some parts of Niagara can deliver, still a little austere but promising. 14 months oak, grainy tannins, and lots of blueberries and smoky appeal.

**Riesling Estate 2006:** Bright straw-green. Floral, citrusy nose also hints at minerals and a curious hint of cooked asparagus. Then very fresh and clean on entry, almost exclusively lemony and lime in its flavour palette, practically citric, almost harsh really, but with above average inner mouth energy and a good, perfumed, long finish. This needs a little time to come around. Made with about 10% of the Johannisberg clone of riesling, "... this was a difficult vintage, almost too cold to achieve optimal ripeness, but I'd say that, comparing the '07 and the '06, the latter is the one for more serious Riesling lovers". About 10 g/l total acidity, 5.6 g/l residual sugar, pH 2.89, the grapes were harvested between October 6 through 21.

**Nuit Blanche 2006 Rosomel Vineyard Beamsville Bench:** Medium deep straw. The nose boasts impressive grapefruit and fig aromas that intermingle with a hint of herbs and a touch of white flowers. Fairly big and rich on entry, almost fat, displaying flavours of papaya, guava, smoky hazelnuts, with a creamy and pleasant sweet-savoury finish of medium complexity and length. The 2005 was the first vintage made of this wine first vintage. A semillon-sauvignon blend sporting a total acidity of 7.1 g/L and a pH of 3.16. The sauvignon blanc was harvested on October 1 and 6, while the semillon was picked on September 29<sup>th</sup>.

**Chardonnay Tete de Cuvée 2006 Beamsville Bench:** Medium deep straw gold. Knockout nose of banana and pineapple, fresh pear and apples with a pretty caramel-yeasty note. Big, rich, and fat and with plenty of acidity to give the flavours of lemon, peach, minerals and smoke good backbone and lift. Finishes long and mineral. From Rosomel and Locust Lane vineyards, it stayed about 15 months in French oak with daily stirring of the lees for the first ten months.

**Chardonnay Estate '06:** Medium deep straw gold. Very deep, rich nose, that has above average complexity in its ripe citrus, toasty and buttery aromas with an obvious vanilla presence. Enters fruity but finishes minerally, with more buttery, caramel and ripe citrus flavours on the rather long finish. Much more complex wine than the '05.

There were a number of barrel samples and unfinished wines I quite liked from Hidden Bench on a visit there last year, all an excellent testament to the potential of the wines: I quite liked the samples of the **Chardonnay Estate 2008** ( Pretty straw-gold. Canned pineapple and yellow apples on the nose, with hints of baking spices and buttered toast. Complex, yeasty wine on the palate with good acid backbone and plenty of flesh. Very serious wine), and the **La Brunante 2007** : Pretty ruby. Perfumed, intense red berry and ripe plum aromas soar from the glass, with hints of espresso and dark chocolate. Bright acids give this considerable lift and definition. This is merlot-based wine is the big red wine of the estate, a vaguely Bordeaux-style blend. When I first tasted this in December 2008, it contained a large percentage of malbec (14%), but the cabernet sauvignon and franc percentages were increased in the final assemblage before bottling.

## **SOUTHBROOK VINEYARDS**

[www.southbrook.com](http://www.southbrook.com)

Now located in Niagara-on-the-Lake, this pioneer of eco-conscious winemaking can count on two contiguous parcels of 75 acres that are farmed organically and biodynamically. The welcome pavillon is housed in a Jack Diamond designed, award winning building (International Architecture Award, Business Week/Architectural Register Award), as pretty to look at as the wines are pretty to taste.

Originally founded in 1992, this estate was originally called Southbrook Farms Winery and located on Major Mckenzie Drive, a large street that anyone who spent his childhood growing up in Canada cannot help but remember, if for no other reason because of being plagued by the radio traffic reports every morning that told of its traffic jams or clear driving. The winery was originally located on owner's Bill Redelmeier's home property, located in the Richmond Hill suburb of northern Toronto, but still very much within the greater city area. Surrounded by buildings and office complexes, its situation was a little like that of Château Haut Brion's today, surrounded as it is by downtown Bordeaux's urban sprawl. Back then, the vegetable and fruit market was just as important to Southbrook, even more important, than wine; in fact, about half of all the wine made was bought up by the farm market's clients. In the beginning, there were no grapes on the premises, and Redelmeier and his then-winemaker, Derek Barnett just trucked them in from Niagara into Toronto; it appears that their first vintage, in 1991, actually contained some fruit from California!

The current winemaker is talented Ann Sperling, who arrived in 2005, as Barnett decided to join into a partnership with the Lailey family, who used to buy Southbrook grapes to make their own wines. Sperling, a very talented young lady, actually followed on the heels of previous winemaker Colin Cambell. She has a determined go-to type personality that lurks beneath the quiet demeanor, and her wines are excellent. Interestingly, her family name is Casorzo, which is the name of a Piedmontese town of Casorzo d'Asti, where her family hails from originally. It is also where a local malvasia grape is grown producing a delectable, slightly fizzy, sweet red wine. With a name like hers, then winemaking can't help but be a natural inclination. However, there's more wine in her background than just the family name: she grew up in B.C., on a vineyard as she quickly points out, and studied Food Science at the University of British Columbia. Her husband is none other than Peter Gamble, who can be rightfully considered to be one of the Ontario wine industry's "founding fathers", and who has consulted or consults for the likes of Ravine Vineyards and Stratus.

"It's hard to say which is the best grape for Niagara, as the regions are so different" she tells me during an interview while strolling by a vineyard "... for example, making Chardonnay in Ontario is easy, but not so in B.C. For example, this is the first time I've worked with so much cabernet sauvignon, and it takes getting used to. I'm also getting to know the soils here better. We have a glacially established soil here, but it's much more uniform than for example at Stratus (a premium winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake), where it's more gravelly-stoney-clay. The soil is heavy, but flour-like, as it used to be the basin of Lake Iroquois, and it's not suited to all varieties in the same way. I think we can actually make great red wines of real structure, at least in this part of Niagara, and that's a different situation than that with Chardonnay that does well throughout the peninsula. Then again, keep in mind that we also started out with it thirty years ago, so it's a variety with which we have all had a head start. So no wonder we all seem to do pretty well with Chardonnay in Niagara" she laughs, only to quickly add, pensively "... the flip side though is that it's a supercompetitive Chardonnay market, and so it isn't as easy to sell nowadays". As I have long admired Sperling for her excellent work at Malivoire, a winery that made a huge if local name for itself with its splendid Gewurztraminer, I ask her about what the future holds relative to that grape variety here at Southbrook. "I'm not sure" she muses "... Gewurz does particularly well there as it's a low vigour spot, while in other parts of Niagara it encounters a little more difficulty to give all it's got".

The clones she works with at Southbrook are 169 and 191 for cabernet sauvignon, 181 and 347 for merlot, 327 for cabernet franc, all obtained from the high quality and well known nurseries of Mercier and Guillaume "...but remember" she cautions "... that Canada has very strict quarantine laws, and so clones really only became available in the early 90s. In fact, you're one of the few wine writers I remember even asking me about them; few people seem to even know the differences they present" she smiles. The vines at the new Southbrook location were only recently planted in

2003 and 2004, and they have visibly thin trunks (even more thin than their age would suggest, due to the recent very hard winters), so much so that the plants have struggled to thrive.

There are different levels of wines made at Southbrook, each identified with a group name. "Poetica" is the line of older vintages and that have never been released commercially before. These are wines made mainly from Bordeaux blends. I should point out that Sperling's first "real" vintage was the '06, but even then she only performed the final selection of lots. The "Triomphe" line of wines is that of the Reserve wines, and these are produced regularly. "Whimsy" is the line of single barrel lots. In general, but it depends on the vintage characteristics of course, the Triomphe wines see about 10 months in barrique, the Poetica wines about 18 to 20. In case of the red wines, it's more like 18 and 24 to 30.

As for winemaking, Sperling mentions that Canadian oak is fine (Canada has a forest of oak trees that provide tightly grained wood that is ideal for barrel making ) "... but the coops don't get it right and so it's unreliable and therefore we cannot take a chance on it yet". On the subject of delestage: "I find air helps the yeasts and wine to perform better, and so we do it even two to four times a day, depending on the phase we are at". Any grape variety you're excited about, I ask? "Cabernet franc always carries a heavy crop but can be thinned out. From a viticultural point of view I can see why it's not liked: it doesn't set properly, doesn't ripen uniformly, and often it's fruit is very disappointing on the vine when tasted. Then something suddenly happens the last two weeks before it gets picked and then it's great; for instance, cabernet sauvignon is much better behaved, and I like its balance, texture and varietal accuracy".

"People in Canada believe in terroir: we have some very good wines but are on our way to making great wines" Sperling says resolutely "We're here at Southbrook because the people are special, we all believe in the biodynamic approach, but it's the whole group that's special, there's a great synergy and it's exciting to be here".

Not to be forgotten are Southbrook's excellent fruit wines (I have always been a fan of the Framboise, but they're all quite good), a veritable house specialty and one that you shouldn't miss trying.

**Riesling 2008:** Pale straw-green, lovely. Fresh, floral and mineral nose which is initially reticent but then opens up in the glass considerably. Enters bright and fresh on the palate, with high but balanced acids, with lots of peach and apricot flavours on the mouth. Well made, in a high acid style., this is really a winner.

**Chardonnay Estate Vineyard 2008:** Lovely straw yellow-gold hue. Intense nose with a curious cucumber aroma, then green apples, pear and pineapple, with a hint of reduction from the lees. Quite acidic on the palate (it was still finishing its malolactic when I first tasted it), but with glossy ripe citrus and banana flavours. Made from fruit of the young vines surrounding the estate, this has strong varietal character and a certain showiness to it, typical of young vines. Very promising and very well done indeed.

**Sauvignon Blanc Triomphe 2007 :** made from purchased fruit (Niagara-on-the-Lake, Vineland Bench). Pale straw yellow-green, it's clean and crisp, and though it reminds you of the variety, with a good, tangy palate feel (the wine stays on its lees) it's a not particularly showy style of Sauvignon Blanc and I'm not particularly impressed. Sperling points out that " we use bought grapes as we

don't grow the variety because for the style we'd wish to produce it in you'd need vigorous growth and our being biodynamic doesn't allow for vigorous growth of anything...irrigation is allowed nearer the lake, so vigorous growth there is possible. The soils here are sandy with deep roots, and we tend to harvest late so as to increase the terpenic presence”.

**Chardonnay Triomphe 2006:** Medium straw-gold. Lovely nose, very nutty, mineral even, then fleshy and balanced on the palate with lovely oak and fruit balance, with prominent pear and citrus flavours. Made from Niagara-on-the-Lake fruit, the '06 was a long growing season, in which there were both September and October rains, leading to a wine that isn't as concentrated as that of other past vintages but that has plenty of varietal character. 100% barrel fermented, 25% new oak.

**Cabernet Sauvignon-Merlot 2005** (a 50-50 blend): Light-medium red. Slightly vegetal nose, with hints of black currants and cedar, but of only modest intensity. Better in the mouth, pleasant and well made with varietally accurate cassis, coffee and smoky plum flavour, but only modest length. From purchased fruit from St. David's Bench (just in front of the escarpment and a much warmer part of Niagara) in front of Chateau de Charmes, where they have also planted semillon and muscat à petit grains. Interestingly, Sperling tells me that in an effort to diminish the vegetal note that often plagues Niagara's red wines in the cooler vintages, table sorting and shaking (in an effort to remove all the twigs and leaves possible) has proven very helpful.

*Some older vintages I have especially liked:*

**Chardonnay Estate 2006 Poetica:** Brilliant medium-deep straw with obvious gold. Nicely integrated oak tones of vanilla frame citrus and grilled plantain aromas. Fresh and clean, with pretty hazelnut, caramel and ripe pineapple and citrus flavours that are nicely supported by unobtrusive (hooray) oak. This is much better than both the 2006 Triomphe Chardonnay or the 2005 Poetica Chardonnay, which is much too marked by clove, butterscotch and ripe fruit aromas and flavours, a consequence of the hoit year. The first wine made at the new facility, this sports a label with some verses by Lesley Choyce, an American turned Canadian citizen who has published over seventy works of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry.

**Chardonnay Estate 1998 Poetica:** Bright straw-gold. Intense and concentrated, this has plenty of citrus, butterscotch and ripe tropical fruit aromas and flavours. Very goofd length and plenty of finesse for such a large wine that is still holding up beautifully. In Niagara, 1998 was great vintage. The label sports verses from Charles GD Roberts, a pre-Confederation poet, and one of the fathers of Canadian literature.