



NAPA OF THE NORTH

Niagara's Trendsetting Ways

by TAMMY BURNS



WHERE ON EARTH

'HIDDEN GEM' IS A PHRASE that gets tossed around a lot in the travel sphere. So much so that it's become a cliché, its accuracy debatable. After all, what's 'hidden' to visitors may very well have celebrity-like status for those who live in or near the area.

You could say that's the case with Canada's Niagara wine region. Located on the border between Ontario and New York State, Niagara is, in many ways, Canada's claim to wine fame. It may not be as commonly known as other grape-growing regions, like California's Napa Valley, France's Bordeaux, or even Australia's Barossa Valley, but many Canadians, in particular those who reside in Ontario, know that the vineyards that line the Niagara River are as worthy of the world stage as

their sisters around the globe.

The reason: Niagara's relative youth (its winemaking only really began to grow in the 1970s), combined with a unique geology and cooler, fluctuating temperatures, gives it an avant garde edge in an old tradition.

Lake Ontario and the Niagara Escarpment shelter the Niagara region, creating a microclimate that features steady airflow, relatively warm winters and temperate summers. What's more is Southern Ontario's unpredictable seasons — winters can vary from frigid ice storms to balmy 5°C temps, while summers can be sticky hot or breezy mild — mean the province can face vastly different crops year after year. It also means grape growers have opportunities for experimentation that extend beyond those of most other wine-producing regions. "There aren't necessarily 'bad' years," explains Patti

Aubrey, owner of Coyote's Run Estate Winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake. "It may be good for one grape, but not others."

Winter Wines

Of course, the biggest of these experiments is Canada's famed ice wine — an intense, sweet drink, almost more liqueur than wine, made from frozen grapes traditionally picked in the dark of night, when frigid temperatures are most consistent. While ice wine originally hails from 1700s Germany, it was Canada's reliably cold winters that enabled the country to take control of the industry in modern times. German immigrants carried the tradition of eiswein to Canada, and in the 1970s, Canada began experimenting with frozen grapes — and catching the world's eye.

Inniskillin, a 40-year-old winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake, has long been seen as Ontario's ice wine founder (the first Canadian ice wine was actually produced in British Columbia in the mid-70s), growing from its first production in 1984 to international accolades in 1991, when its '89 Vidal won the Grand Prix d'Honneur at France's Vinexpo. And today, Inniskillin remains the primary name for Niagara ice wine, although now nearly every vineyard in the region produces some form of it — and most of them will remind you that it's not what you think.

"We don't call it a sweet or dessert wine. If you say you want a sweet wine, 50 percent of people will say no," says Debi Pratt, director of public relations for Inniskillin. "We call it a luxury wine that's rich and concentrated." It's an important distinction — while ice wine is commonly associated with being a dessert wine, it actually pairs well with cheeses and even some lighter meats like pork. Pair it with an overly sweet dessert, and your teeth — and head — will ache for the rest of the night.

The dedication Niagara has to its ice wine has resulted in the annual Niagara Icewine Festival. Every January, visitors can buy weekend passes for food and ice wine pairings at selected wineries, and the main street of Niagara-on-the-Lake village shuts down for an outdoor vendor exhibit, starring local vineyards and restaurants. Evenings bring parties like the Sparkle and Ice cocktail party and the Flash & Panache Icewine Cocktail Competition. Visitors cozy up at charming bed and



*ABOVE Cocktail competition.
BELOW Ice wine.*

breakfasts (the region is full of them) or historic hotels like the opulent Prince of Wales, and indulge under the chilly skies of a Canadian frost.

Style, Sheep and Soil

But Niagara's experimental streak extends beyond winter wines. Sustainable farming and production, soil experimentation, and unusual blends are all part of the ever-developing language of Niagara winemaking.

Stratus, a stylish, trendy and environmentally conscious winemaker, came on the Niagara scene in 2005, bringing with it a fair amount of buzz. The sleek space and eclectic vineyard (they grow 18 types of grapes) would have been enough, but Stratus raised the bar, establishing itself as the world's first LEED-certified winery, and implementing an elevated production system that relies on gravity rather than pumps — enabling producers to be more "gentle" with the wine, says Suzanne Janke, Stratus' director of retail and hospitality.

What's more, even Stratus' library of wine offerings is flipped from tradition. While most wineries rely on sales of their cheaper wines to fuel their reserve offerings, Stratus puts emphasis on its premiums first. Every year, the vineyard produces a simply named Red and White, both made from a blend that is "an expression of the best grapes in the vineyard," says Janke. That blend could include as many as eight or nine grape varietals, leading to some surprising flavours (their 2009 White, blended from Semillon, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier and Gewurztraminer, is unexpectedly robust and spicy — and actually just as, if not more, popular with red drinkers than that year's red blend).

Another of Niagara's eco-conscious vineyards is Southbrook Vineyards, which opened in 2008 and holds





ABOVE *Prince of Wales interior.*
BELOW *Coyotes Run.*



Coyote's Run Estate Winery
www.coyotesrunwinery.com

Inniskillin
www.inniskillin.com

Niagara Wine Festival
www.niagarawinefestival.com

Konzelmann Estate Winery
www.konzelmann.ca

Stratus Wines
www.stratuswines.com

Southbrook Vineyards
www.southbrook.com

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«the title of Canada's first organic, biodynamic winery. Beyond its avoidance of pesticides and its reliance on recycled rainwater, Southbrook uses biodynamic farming practices, meaning grapes are hand-picked (and rotting grapes hand-removed), on-site livestock provide fertilizer and natural lawn maintenance (it's not uncommon to see Southbrook's many sheep wandering the grounds, snacking on grass), and planted roses act as a sort of canary for the vineyard, flagging infections before they hit the vines. Southbrook is also committed to smaller batch production, and its famed Framboise raspberry wine was accepted into Ontario's government-regulated liquor stores in the 90s, at a time when the sale of non-grape fruit wines was still in its infancy.

A few concessions over, at Coyote's Run, geology is given centre stage. There are two visible soils — one

...Niagara's experimental streak extends beyond winter wines...



black, one red — that cut straight through the property. They are a reflection of Niagara's geological history — the red is part of the ancient (450 million years old) Queenston shale bedrock that runs beneath the younger, more commonly found black soil. The shale pops up from a depth of 10 to 20 metres in various spots throughout the Niagara region, but Coyote's Run is the only place where the divide is so obvious and extensive. As an experiment, owners Jeff and Patti Aubrey planted the same grapes on both soils (to date, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc and Chardonnay), and discovered two distinctly different wines. The Black Paw offers a deep, smoky, earthy taste, while the Red Paw is fruity and floral. The fact that two clearly different flavours could come from the same grapes grown just a few feet away from one another is a reflection of the uniqueness of the Niagara wineries as a whole. Even within the Niagara-on-the-Lake community, seasons vary based on how close vineyards are to the water. For example, interior-based Coyote's Run's spring tends to arrive about 10 days sooner than river-side Inniskillin's.

While Niagara may be a gem, it's not really hidden — especially not to the many Canadians, and even northern Americans, who fill up the hotels and B&Bs during the region's many festivals. However, even for the most discerning and experienced of wine drinkers (this writer included), it does offer quite a few surprises that will make you feel like you've stumbled into unmapped territory.