

NIAGARA



CONFIDENTIAL

THERE'S A VIBRANT WINE SCENE BEYOND NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE.
LINDA BRAMBLE POINTS OUT SOME NEW DISCOVERIES

NIAGARA'S WINE COUNTRY IS A PLACE to come when you need some time to get back into the scale of things; where you can have a little bit of landscape to yourself, yet blend it, at your pace, with the pleasures of tasting fine wine and eating well.

Since the mid-seventies there have been three types of individuals who have turned their hands to wine: the trailblazers (e.g. Inniskillin, Château des Charmes, Cave Spring Cellars), the professional avocationists (e.g. Malivoire, Kacaba, Lakeview Cellars) and the growers who become winemakers (e.g. Lailey, Hernder, Legends). Today's splurge of new properties is no exception.

In Niagara alone, there are over 70 wineries, so I've selected just a few that are either brand new or are found on back roads you may not yet have ventured on. Their wines are as accomplished as their stories are intriguing.

THE TRAILBLAZERS

Trailblazers don't just have hot ideas; they are perpetually on broil, as business guru Tom Peters, once said. Where others might have creative ideas and inspiration, these guys have the nerve to take the plunge.

Southbrook Vineyards opened this

May, and has proven to be more than just a relocation from their 285-acre market farm and winery in Maple, Ontario, to 151 acres in Niagara-on-the-Lake. It is a new landmark for Niagara, designed by the renowned architect, Jack Diamond. It incorporates some of the most innovative ideas in wine growing, winemaking and hospitality in the world today. He, along with owners Bill and Marilyn Redelmeier have created a craftsmen's showcase in a comfortable environment that is useful, modern and completely dedicated to the uncomplicated pleasures of wine and food.

The lines of the one-storey LEED-certified building move with a lithe grace—lean and exquisite. When you enter there is an immediate sense of lightness with no cluttering racks of corkscrews and tee-shirts. Rather, a bank of backlit recessed display cases and a soothing, uninterrupted view of the vineyard. At the tasting bar, visitors sample both new and older vintages — which is an unusual feature in itself. They've also included a built-in pizza oven from which they create light patio lunches in summer and soups in winter. On the other third of the building is a demonstration kitchen and gathering room where guest chefs will conduct cooking classes.

They've dedicated the heart of the

building to grand tastings and dinners set on one of the most stunning oak tables I've ever seen, sawn from a tree sourced from their old farm in Maple. On either side of the table are functioning oak barrels that incredibly spin on axels to facilitate battonage. Even the washrooms, a moment of truth for any traveller, are elegant.

What makes this project so striking is the way in which they have integrated their strong farming values about being nature's stewards into every phase of the winery operation. Their intention throughout is "to step lightly on the land" — a leitmotif that is repeated in the vineyard where they farm both organically and biodynamically. Accomplished

The tasting room at Southbrook Vineyards





“WE ARE NOT CONSERVATIVE OR CONVENTIONAL, BUT WE ARE VERY FRIENDLY AND WE LOVE TO HAVE FUN.”

winemaker Ann Sperling guides this part of the project and creates wines of uncompromising quality.

The next trailblazer began his project, Frogpond Farm, eight years ago on a much less grand scale, but no less bold and pioneering. After struggling for recognition for years, he is now starting to come into his own. Jens Gemmrich and his wife Heike Koch came to Canada from Germany in 1994 when Jens accepted the position as winemaker for Stonechurch Vineyards. They bought a farm in 1996 for a place to live and, as a hobby, planted the former orchard with vines.

When they planted their 10-acre farm there was “never a question of whether it would be organic,” says Jens. For them it was simply “the right way of doing things.” When he decided the time had come to go out on his own, he built a processing barn. By 2000 his operation was certified as an organic winery, the only completely certified winery in Canada to use the natural biodiversity of their farm to create healthy grapes. This meant that, other than minimal levels of preserving sulphur, they use no synthetic chemicals in the field or cellar.

If you think organic wines are less tasty, think again. His are rich, concentrated and complex with a

tantalizing theme of minerality threading through. If you really are interested in the voice of the land as it is expressed in the wine, visit Frogpond Farm.

The third trailblazer is Eugene Roman, who, together with his wife Renate and their two teenagers, opened Rosewood Estates and Meadery this spring on a hillside estate in Beamsville. Winemaker Natalie Spytkowski has made the wine for the past two years and winning awards, especially for her sublime Pinot Gris and very mellow Merlot. She’s currently keeping an eye on some Pinot Noir that she fermented using only natural yeasts — a mettle test for any winemaker.

What sets this project apart is that they also make wine from honey (known as mead). Eugene Roman, who is in charge of research and development at Bell Laboratories, has been a beekeeper since he was four years old. He and Natalie experimented for months to create the right formula from which to successfully produce a light dry wine with honeyed floral notes.

Eugene’s real art is his approach to innovation. Everywhere you look in the winery there is evidence of his ingenuity. With the ozonator they use to disinfect their barrels, for instance, he is starting research trials with scientists from the province to disinfect beehive frames. No one knows what threatened the bee population in other parts of North America last year. Eugene’s experiment might shed some light.

In a back room of the winery he gathers his bees’ honey and bottles it for retail sale. He uses the bees’ wax to make candles from moulds he fabricated. To derive the look of his label, he gathered a group of people in a brainstorming “swarm.” To say he’s as busy as his bees is an understatement.

THE PROFESSIONAL AVOCAUTIONISTS

This group of winery owners are the doctors, accountants and senior executives who have downshifted from brain-weary urban professions to a more manageable pace in the country. They are fun to be with, often humbled by their miscalculations of life in the country, but passionate about their decisions.

Ten years ago, Krystyna and Jan Tarasewicz headed out of city for the restorative virtues of the country. They bought 40 acres on a south-facing slope in Beamsville and from scratch, planted vineyards on 26 acres. “There are other ways to make money,” confesses an overworked but fun-loving Krystyna, who is also the art director for Harlequin Books. Her husband Jan is a veterinarian.

Two years ago they hired the talented wine consultant, Andrzej Lipinski to convert their grapes into a refined line of serious wines, however, they didn’t want to take themselves too seriously, so they hired Vancouver-based Bernie Hadley-Beauregard from Brandever to help convey their message. Bernie is the award-winning marketer whose clients include Therapy Vineyards, Blasted Church, Dirty Laundry, Laughing Stock and Megalomaniac. The Organized Crime Winery concept was born.

The tasting room is the former dining room of their hillside home. Krystyna, as animated and colourful as her bold floral paintings confesses, “We are not conservative or conventional, but we are very friendly and we love to have fun.” You will too. Guaranteed.

When Mauro Scarselone, an auditor for Price-Waterhouse Coopers, finally admitted that he “hated accounting,” he, with his sister Anna, bought 10 acres of empty land in Vineland in 1995. After four years of planting, and two more to



Palatine Hills



build the winery with his brother, they opened Ridgepoint Wines. The altitude of the rolling hills and the foggy mornings that dissipated as the day unfolded suggested just the right conditions to plant Nebbiolo, the grape variety that constituted his favourite wine, Barolo.

The noble wine of northwestern Italy takes years to show its grace, and it's as finicky as Pinot Noir; however, Mauro's 2002 Nebbiolo, the only one in Ontario, has the classic flavours of tar and roses, plus the plushness of ripe and now friendly tannins.

Winemaker Arthur Harder has since crafted a pristine line of whites, including a beautiful Alsatian-style Gewürztraminer and a steely Riesling.

Mauro's sister Anna, formerly a baker, is in charge of their Tuscan-inspired restaurant from whose windows you can enjoy a panoramic view of the countryside. Chef Chris Knight's gnocchi absolutely sing.

Andrzej Lipinski, winemaker-consultant for both The Organized Crime Winery and Megalomaniac line of wines, is also the winemaker-consultant for another project that has stayed low under the radar for the past two years. Crispino Wines is the brainchild of Len Crispino, currently President and CEO of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, and once the trade and investment commissioner to Italy for Ontario. It was while he was in Milan that he became familiar with a winemaking process he vowed to someday use in a winery of his own.

The process is called appassimento, which involves drying a selected portion of grapes. It is usually limited to bold reds, such as Amarone, but Crispino and Lipinski apply it to whites as well. The results are astonishing. Their wines are packed with intense flavors and concentration with unusual levels of

complexity. Unlike a few producers who might create one wine in a portfolio of wines using the method, their whole production is grounded on the process.

"It's risky," says Crispino, "but I'm fully committed to it."

I sampled an exhilarating Sauvignon Blanc, a vibrant Riesling and a series of carnal reds of melted chocolate and mocha.

He and his wife Marisa bought their vineyard in Vineland after experiencing a life-changing event in Len's life.

For several years they farmed the crop and sold the premium grapes to local wineries. When a space became available for lease at the Horticulture Institute of Ontario in Vineland, they took the opportunity to open up a winery. The tasting room in front of the building is brand new, built by local craftsmen and evocative of Crispino's Italian heritage. Crispino's story will be told on their new labels, designed by the prolific Bernie Hadley-Beauregard, so watch for something quirky, funky and downright appealing.

GROWERS INTO MAKERS

The grower has intimate knowledge of the best places on his or her site where the finest fruit grows. This is why we pay attention when growers open wineries of their own.

John Neufeld, once a prominent leader of the Grape Growers of Ontario, opened his own winery, Palatine Hills, in 1998 on his 180-acre farm. The property, once granted to a soldier after the War of 1812, had been in the family since 1945. Many of his viniferas, especially his Gamay and Rieslings, date back to 1975. Dave Hojnoski, formerly with Andrès, is winemaker. Particularly lovely is their 2006 Riesling Traminer and their 100 percent Chardonnay sparkling wine made in the traditional style.

Growing grapes has been in Ken Dyck's family for over 50 years. Ken was even earlier than John Neufeld in taking the plunge in 1971 to plant vinifera when he and wife Renate bought a vineyard of their own. Little did they know that 36 years later their children, Roselyn and Warren, plus Roselyn's wine merchant husband Andrew Cieszkowski would encourage them to open Cattail Creek Estate Winery, which they did in 2007.

Winemaker Tatjana Cuk has shepherded their best old vines into a gratifying line of fresh, aromatic, fruit-intense wines.

Grape grower Steve Murdza and his wife Vivien merged their wine-growing experience with the business savvy of Jeff and Patti Aubrey to open Coyote's Run in 2004. The Murdza name in grape-growing circles in Niagara is synonymous with leadership and innovation in growing. Steve, with his Dad Stan and brother prepared, planted and maintained more vineyards in Niagara than any other vineyard management company.

The Coyote's Run fruit is sourced from their own 30-year-old, 58-acre vineyard outside the town of St. David's in Niagara-on-the-Lake. Being familiar with the growing conditions all over Niagara, they chose this site because it was one of the warmest situated along the base of the escarpment, often two or three degrees warmer than other parts of the Peninsula. Variegated bands of heavy clay comprise the soil, which, in a cross-sectional view, resembles the famed Terra Rosa soils of Coonawarra in Australia.

Dave Shepherd, winemaker for 20 years at Inniskillin, true to his name, has guided, among other varieties and a fine Meritage blend, a line of exciting Pinot Noir and Chardonnays. These are wines that are well worth discovering. ≡