

# Lake Erie North Shore Gathers Momentum

Locals refer to the area as The Deep South, and they have a point. During a late-August visit, 22 degrees and rain in Toronto at 1 p.m. became 28 sunny, humid degrees in Kingsville at 5 p.m. Mexican labourers, who harvest Essex County's bounty, rode their bicycles after a day in the fields.

Lake Erie North Shore appellation doesn't look like a wine region. There are huge greenhouses everywhere and fields full of produce. While roadside stands in Niagara tempt with peaches and plums, here you get tomatoes, cucumbers and bell peppers. But against this backdrop, wine quality is blossoming and new wineries are opening their doors.

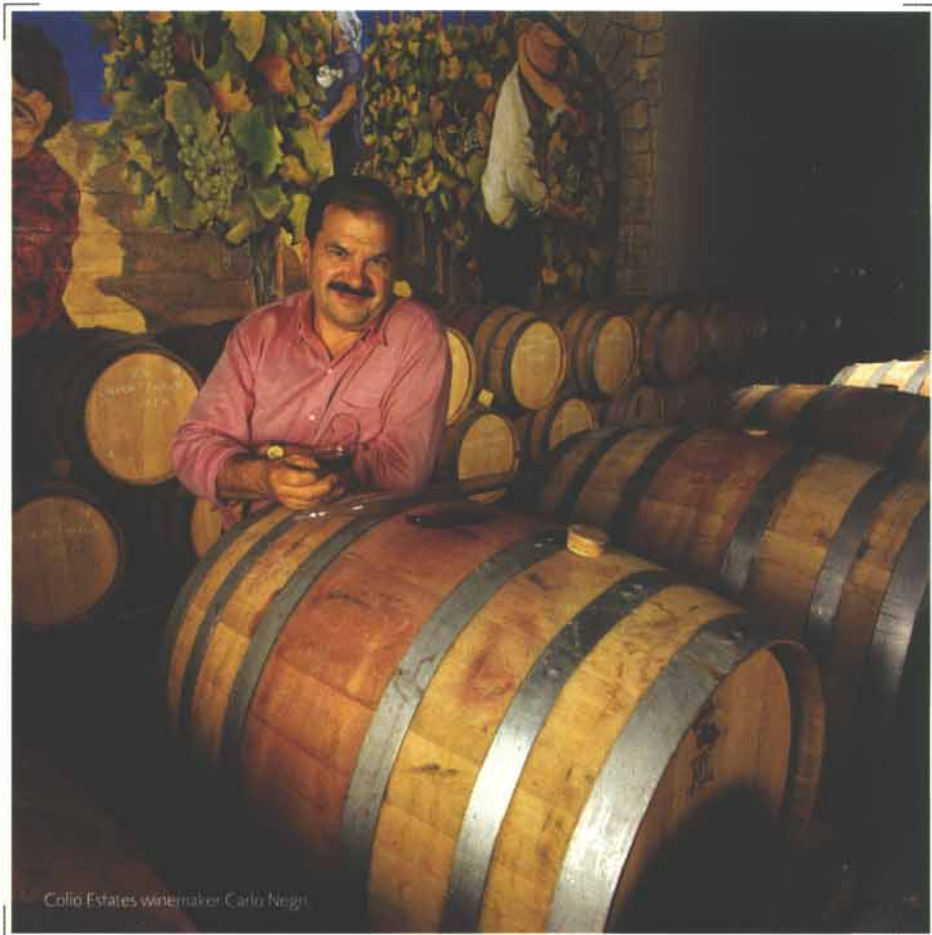
Laurie MacDonald, executive director of VQA Ontario, confirms the region's rapid progress. "It's definitely developing and we've seen a spurt of growth, from three VQA wineries in 2000 to 11 today."

Winemaking has been happening in the area since Confederation. Vin Villa, on Pelee Island, was up and running in the 1860s. But, as with Niagara, vinifera grapes were not planted until about 30 years ago. Today the area produces good quality whites like chardonnay, riesling and gewürztraminer, with the pinot gris (increasingly called "grigio") also reliable. But the distinguishing feature is its Bordeaux-style reds.

"This area is particularly suited to producing good red grapes," says Colio Estates winemaker Carlo Negri, whose 2002 CEV Reserve Merlot won a gold medal and "Best Merlot" at Cuvée 2005 in Niagara-on-the-Lake. "The summer heat is similar to Niagara's, but our growing season is at least 10 days longer and so the grapes mature more slowly."

Negri, who was named Ontario's Winemaker of the Year in 2005, will retire next year after four decades. He has a word of caution for those who trumpet pinot noir as Ontario's next great wine: "My view of pinot noir [in Ontario] is that it must be a good year. In poor years, you can have a decent cabernet franc or merlot, but not a decent pinot."

Pelee Island Winery winemaker Jeff Kah presides over Ontario's largest vineyard at 550 acres, providing impressive economies of scale



Colio Estates winemaker Carlo Negri

that result in lower prices. He says his winery is focused on super-cleanliness and attention to detail in the production area, and it too is expanding. "We were inspired by some of the bigger Niagara wineries who have amazing tasting rooms," says Kah, whose ambition couldn't have come at a better time.

John Fancsy is the affable giant spearheading the ambitious Viewpointe Estates Winery in Harrow, which began selling its wines in October. With millions invested, he and his partners are taking a bold bet that the area's time has indeed come.

"We want to position ourselves as the destination winery in southwestern Ontario," says Fancsy. "At Viewpointe we're offering something special — a winery experience, a cooking experience, or just a great place to just hang out by the lake."

The nearly completed complex, which features an impressive kitchen with a dazzling row of frighteningly industrial-looking stainless steel stoves and a large area for cooking-demo spectators, will have its grand opening next spring. Viewpointe has also invested in winemaking technology, including an automatic "de-leafer" — a useful tool in a high humidity region where there's a danger of mildew and diseases. And like Colio and Pelee Island Winery, Viewpointe is experimenting with clones and rootstocks to see which perform best, as well as a range of different grapes. Auxerrois, anyone?

So how is all this Erie activity translating in the glass? Check out the Buyer's Guide on page 60, where David Lawrason profiles some of the best quality and value wines of the region.