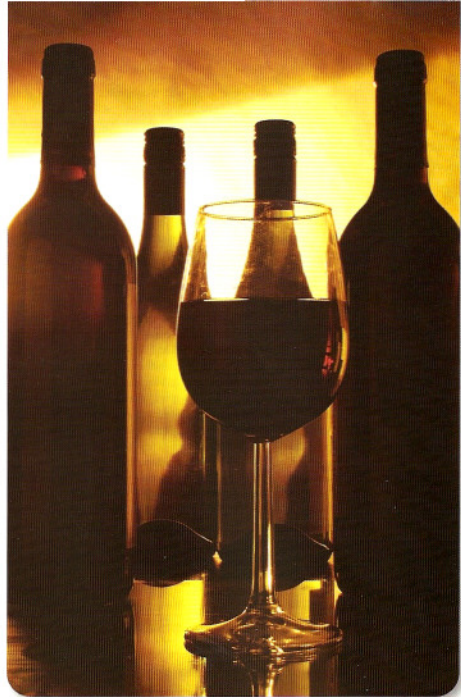


pouring for profits



# The Grape White North

Just a few years ago, it was hard to find Canadian wines featured at many of the best restaurants across the country, and rarer still to find high-priced ones. Not anymore. Today, top sommeliers recommend quality wines from Ontario and B.C. and customers are buying.

Jamie Drummond of Jamie Kennedy Wine Bar in Toronto has always offered Canadian wines on his list. While JKWB clientele is known to tolerate higher prices, he offered Vintner's Private Reserve 2002 from Niagara's Peninsula Ridge at a jaw-dropping \$36 per glass — and still couldn't keep the bottles corked. "I got three cases and sold it all, by the glass. We never have trouble selling Ontario wine, even at higher prices."

Don't have Canadian wines on your list? Here's what you're missing

BY ALAN MCGINTY



#### FASTFACTS

	Niagara/Ontario	Okanagan/B.C.
Wine grape acreage	20,000	7,500
Value of vineyard land	\$40,000 per acre	\$65,000 to \$100,000 per acre
Number of wineries	125	134
Retail value of VQA sales	\$205 million	\$151 million
Most planted varietal	Chardonnay	Merlot
Source: winesofontario.org; wineaccess.ca		Source: winebc.com; wineaccess.ca; Vancouver Sun (for land price estimates)

## “THE QUALITY IS THERE. I THINK WE CAN COMPETE WITH NAPA VALLEY”

While Drummond acknowledges Ontario wines still have a “stigma” with some oenophiles, he stresses the importance of looking at quality. “Don’t put a wine on your list just because it’s Canadian,” he cautions. “Make sure it’s good, too.”

In Vancouver, there’s little concern about the quality of B.C. wine. In fact, its near-total acceptance causes pangs of jealousy among winemakers from Ontario, as well as in neighbouring U.S. upstart region, Washington. “In the early days, it was tough because there was strong prejudice against B.C. wines — everybody remembered Calona Red. We would challenge diners to compare B.C. wines to European ones,” says Brent Hayman of Raincity Grill, who has been sommelier there for 12 years. “Some would just refuse, but nobody in the last year has said ‘I won’t have B.C. wine.’”

On Raincity Grill’s West Coast-only wine list, B.C. wines are far and away the biggest sellers, mopping the floor with California, Oregon and Washington producers. Hayman says when he

started, 85 per cent of the wine sold was from California. “Today B.C. accounts for about 90 per cent of the value, even though it’s only 20 per cent of our list [of 550 wines].” There’s regional pride at work, too, he adds. “Washington wines have not been able to garner the support in Seattle that B.C. wines have in Vancouver.”

Calgary is a great example of a city where Canadian wines fare well without local wine producers. River Café’s Rob Smith has a “Canadian” section at the front of his 700-strong wine list, with some 85 per cent of the homegrown wines from B.C. Smith admits he was “a bit of a skeptic” when he first joined River Café five years ago, about the same time quality levels spiked in wines from B.C.’s Okanagan Valley. “I was a little nervous about the rising prices,” he said, “but the quality is there. I think we [can] compete with Napa Valley.” River Café’s priciest Canadian? Mission Hill Oculus 2004, which sells for \$135 a bottle. Smith also credits Alberta’s liquor privatization



## County Living

*A new hotbed for wine is growing a few hours outside Toronto*

Niagara and the Okanagan are at the northern fringes of the winegrowing belt. Prince Edward County is dangling over the edge. Some 200 kilometres east of Toronto, “the County” has a dozen wineries. But the vines must undergo “hilling” — after harvest in late October they’re buried, as temperatures can fall below a vine-killing -20° most winters.

Wineries of note include Huff Estates, Closson Estates and Grange of Prince Edward Estate with its Trumpour’s Mill series. And then there’s Norman Hardie.

After working in the restaurant business — at a Michelin-starred place in Dijon and as sommelier at Toronto’s Four Seasons — Hardie spent six years abroad learning about wine in places like Oregon, New Zealand, South Africa and France. In 2002, he started bottling his own. When someone suggested he look into Prince Edward County, Hardie did and loved it. “I’ve never seen soil like that outside of Burgundy!”

Hardie says its cool climate and the perfect complement of minerals in the soil make PEC ideal for varietals like Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. And he’s also producing a fun melon de Bourgogne, which makes Muscadet. Hardie and fellow County winemakers buy grapes from Niagara to top up their supplies. “I’m about 65 per cent County, 35 per cent Niagara,” he says.

His wines range from \$19 to \$39 and sell out every year.



Norman Hardie

with the development of quality wine boutiques, which have adventurous and enthusiastic staff. "We're starting to see their influence rubbing off. People are becoming more educated."

One difficulty with both the wine-producing regions of Niagara and the Okanagan is that production levels are small. "Cult" producers like Daniel Lenko routinely sell out of wines and even larger producers may have trouble keeping up with demand for certain varietals. For Sarah D'Amato, sommelier at Toronto's Four Seasons Hotel, this isn't a problem. "Continuity is important with the wine list, but look at it another way — buying a small batch that can't be re-ordered when it runs out keeps the list interesting."

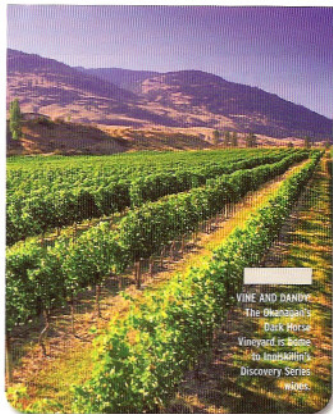
A growing celebrity interest in Canadian wine also keeps things fresh. In the past few years alone, Dan Aykroyd, Mike Weir and Wayne Gretzky have all formed partnerships with vintners to produce wine in Niagara. In each case they've teamed up with established wineries and the quality of what they're bottling is good. Most of their wines are priced well below \$20 — can it be long before sports fans choose a Cabernet or Chardonnay over Coors Light?

Another ongoing challenge for Canadian winemakers is that it's expensive to produce wine here. High labour costs, lower crop yields, "winter kill" of a certain percentage of vines and high taxes mean it's difficult to compete at the bottom end. Canadian wine producers foisted unrefined plonk on the market for years to keep costs competitive with California's "jug" wines and Europe's "wine lake." Most wineries have dropped the nastier hybrids and are focusing on quality improvements, but there's still a temptation to cater to the market that won't spend more than \$7 or \$8 a bottle (retail). D'Amato thinks ignoring the bottom end while boosting quality is the best course of action. "We don't do [bargain wines] well. California and Chile can, but our cheap wines are not interesting, and they're not even that cheap."

With annual sales in excess of \$650 million, Vincor is the heavyweight champion of Canadian wine production. Now owned by U.S.-based Constellation Wines, Vincor produces loads of Chardonnays, Cabernets and Merlots, but for licencees whose clientele wants trendy wines, Vincor's got plenty to offer, too. "Pinot Grigio is the fastest-growing varietal [in Canada] and we've been successful with our Inniskillin Niagara Pinot Grigio," says Lisa Fenn, marketing manager at Vincor in Mississauga, Ont. "But it's a bit of a double-edged sword — Pinot Grigio is incredibly difficult to grow in Niagara, so there are some supply challenges." Sauvignon Blanc is another varietal that was rare a few years ago, but now both B.C. and Ontario produce respectable versions at good prices. In B.C., there's also excitement about Pinot Blanc.

Through its main brands, Jackson-Triggs and Inniskillin, Vincor offers the widest range of Canadian wines. Prices start as low as \$7.50 per bottle and there's a decent selection into the low teens. But it has high-end products as well, like Osoyoos Larose and Le Clos Jordanne. "First, taste them," says D'Amato, "and second, pay attention to your vintages."

One theme every sommelier stresses is the importance of



**VINE AND DANDY**  
The Okanagan's Dark Horse Vineyard is home to Inniskillin's Discovery Series wines.

staff training and getting them "pumped" about Canadian wines. "If even one staff member is enthused by a domestic wine, he'll be a selling machine," says Drummond. "I say this from personal observation — staff knowledge is key." □

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