

Canada's Boutique Wineries Rank with the best.

John Howard couldn't help smiling as he lifted a glass of his winery's Sauvignon Blanc. He had returned from Verona, Italy where his Vineland Estates winery had just scooped Vinitaly's 'Premio Speciale Grand VinItaly 2003', the top overall award at the international competition. The Grand Vinitaly is awarded to the single winery achieving the highest combined medal score from all categories in the entire competition. Vineland Estates competed from among an unprecedented 95 gold medals from 3,334 wines submitted by 31 countries around the world.

The win was great, but what really excites Howard is the potential for Canadian wines. Howard explains that unlike other New World wine regions, Canada is able to purchase nursery stock from France; we don't have a nursery industry producing baby grape plants. Howard recalls the first time he bought plants in Montpellier, where the person standing to

his left was from Zonin, and the person standing to his right was the premier viticulturalist from Drouhin in Burgundy. "The guy came out and said, 'OK. Zonin gets 5,000 plants, Drouhin gets 5,000 and Mr. Howard, you are getting 50,000 plants'. These guys just about flipped. For them to buy 50,000 plants is unheard of. 'So, you're buying 50,000 plants?' they said. And the guy corrected them, saying, 'No, actually he's ordered 300,000 plants. He's doing 50,000 a year for six years.'"

Howard says that "It appears that we've got this brilliant terroir, incredible microclimate, are able to go out and secure the same clones, grape plants, as major châteaux in Bordeaux and Burgundy because no one else can get them. And, by the way, the wines that have been tasted so far tend to be very well received until you tell people that the vineyard is just two years old. Then they just go bananas. We save that for last. The first thing they do is put their nose back in the glass. And they just

can't believe the level of concentration we're getting. They certainly can't believe the element of maturity in terms of the varietal." So, assuming you agree that 90 percent of a wine's quality is tied to the quality of the grapes that are harvested, then there is an incredible foundation on which to build future success in Canadian wine.

We are able to find the world's greatest wines on our retail shelves. These wines enable Canadian consumers to conduct reality checks against our domestic product. Winemakers are able to do endless blind-tasting comparisons of Niagara's newest Chardonnays or Pinot Noirs against the world's benchmark versions of these grapes (Burgundies or New World styles) or Okanagan's Merlots or Pinot Gris against Bordeaux and Alsace. The result is an honest progress assessment.

Malivoire's Managing Winemaker, Ann Sperling, recently received calls from the





media and Ontario product consultants after her 2000 Moira Vineyard Chardonnay showed particularly well at a blind tasting of benchmark Chardonnays available in Ontario put together by Mondavi. These competitive tastings raise all palates. There has been real achievement. Ontario now has more than 6,600 acres of vinifera vines; 80 percent of the vineyards are concentrated on the exceptionally favoured Niagara Peninsula. The continental climate here, on a latitude between Bordeaux and Burgundy, has proved excellent for ripening fine wine grapes, and the cold winters allow for the pressing of frozen grapes consistently each year to make Canada's international flagship Icewine.

The Niagara appellation's inherent strengths are crisp, floral-scented Rieslings, Chardonnays that range from elegant to flamboyant and Pinot Noir that has elegance and finesse. The red Burgundy grape, notoriously difficult to grow successfully elsewhere, particularly in warm climates, is now

one of Canada's most planted red wine grapes. Part of the reason Pinot has taken off here is that Canada is one of the very few New World wine-producing countries with a climate cool enough to suit it. (If this early-ripening grape ripens too fast, it fails to build up any interesting flavours and makes simple, jammy red wine.) Cabernet Sauvignon is also well established. And Cabernet Franc and Merlot appear to be Niagara's most promising reds. Established overachievers include Inniskillin and now Vineland Estates. Boutique, artisan wineries producing high-quality wines include Malivoire and Lailey Vineyards, with access to some of the oldest vines planted (in 1970) in Canada; Thirteenth Street, which produces perhaps the best Rieslings in Canada; and up-and-comer Thomas & Vaughan.

Those of you who love fine red Burgundy should sample Inniskillin's 2000 Montague Estate Vineyard Pinot Noir, which has real character and delicacy. Philip Dowell, who made delicate Pinot Noir at Coldstream Hills (wine writer James Halliday's old property)

in the Yarra Valley of Australia for ten years, is the winemaker. Philip uses carefully selected Burgundian (Dijon) clones in the Montague Estate vineyard, where quality is enhanced through severe crop thinning, the 'green harvest'. You can taste the fact that this wine was made from vines that owe their being to the Côte D'Or. Fruitiness and structure are enhanced by using varying percentages of whole-berry fermentation, and Burgundian-style, open-top fermenters are used for gentle extraction.

What the rest of the world also doesn't know is that the southwestern corner of Canada has been planting vinifera vines at an extraordinary pace, and producing some startlingly good wines from them, so that it now has more than 5,000 acres of vinifera vines. The centre of Canada's expanding western wine industry is the Okanagan Valley, with natural conditions similar to eastern Washington; in fact, the south of the Okanagan Valley is so dry it qualifies as a desert. Irrigation is essential, while the hot

days and cold nights of the desert induce good colour and well-defined flavours in most varieties, so acidities are naturally high. Most wines are grown on the slopes of the long, narrow Okanagan Lake and, in the right hands, the resulting wines are beautiful. Mission Hill's New Zealand winemaker John Simes arrived in 1992, and the first vintage of his Grand Reserve Barrel Select Chardonnay won Best Chardonnay at the prestigious International Wine & Spirit Competition 1994, in London, England. It was a stunning validation of the quality in Canadian wine. (The judging panel couldn't believe the result, and retasted, and still had the same result.) Mission Hill has since gone from strength to strength.

British Columbia clearly has exciting potential for Sauvignon Blanc, perhaps as much as the more widely planted Alsace grape varieties. Sumac Ridge is another world-class producer, and winemaker Mark Wendenburg, a Penticton, B.C. native who learned his craft in Europe and Australia, makes a variety of well-crafted wines. In addition to Mission Hill and Sumac Ridge, established over-achievers include Burrowing Owl, Cedar Creek and Quail's Gate. Several artisan operations are emerging, with as much emphasis on growing

great grapes as on making wine. Ian and Gitta Sutherland's 10-acre Poplar Grove property located around Naramata, on the east side of Okanagan Lake, is considered one of the best vineyard locations in the Okanagan. Grapes have a long frost-free autumn in which to mature due to the tempering lake effect. Annual production is about 2,000 cases, with the Merlot 2000, Pinot Gris 2001, Riesling 2001 and Late Harvest Gewurztraminer 2001 the four current releases. Ian Sutherland is a self-taught winemaker who approached wine production with an academic rigour, reading such world-class authorities as Dr. Paul Pontilliers of Château Margaux. He made his first wine in 1995 from Cabernet Franc and Merlot grapes purchased from Bordeaux. His wines have a distinctive style, revealing powerful, intense flavours, especially the sensational Pinot Gris. Sutherland knows that these artisan wines have a personality, one reason why they have achieved cult status (they're available only in fine restaurants and by mailing list). Yet Sutherland plans to maintain his small production.

Stag's Hollow, located just south of Okanagan Falls, is another undiscovered gem in the south Okanagan Valley. Encompassing a unique microclimate, the 10-acre vineyard was planted in 1990. Nutrient-lean, well-drained

gravel and clay loam soils, combined with the climatic conditions, create wines that express the distinctive character of the terroir. Aged between ten months and two years in French and American barriques, the Chardonnay, Merlot and Pinot Noir wines are rich and elegant. Stag's Hollow wines are handcrafted, and with a production of fewer than 2,000 cases annually are difficult to find (if you can locate some, give me a call). Winemaker Michael Bartier makes most of the wine from estate grapes, but grapes are also purchased from small growers who share Stag's Hollow's growing philosophy. And a name to watch is Osoyoos Larose, a joint venture between Groupe Taillan of Bordeaux, which owns several classified-growth châteaux, and Vincor. Wine writer James Halliday describes a barrel sample of a 2001 Bordeaux blend, the first vintage made by French-trained winemaker Pascal Madevon under the direction of Groupe Taillan consultant Alain Sutre, as "marvelous" and setting "new standards for richness and ripeness." The goal of the joint venture is to produce superior wines that have the same complexities and aging ability expected of classified growths of Bordeaux, wines that will be recognized the world over. And you can expect in excess of \$50 as a per bottle price tag.





ABOVE: John Howard at his Vineland Estates winery.

It took France four centuries to build the most respected wine industry in the world. It has taken Canadians just over a decade to adopt certain aspects of the French model, elevate the quality of domestic wines, and make them widely available in Canada. Today, Canadian vintners, along with a number of influential wine critics, contend that the best Canadian wines can compete with the best from other countries. Canada has been famous for its Icewine since Inniskillin first won the Grand Prix d'Honneur at Vinexpo 1991 in Bordeaux, France. But our table wines are now being made with increasing élan and are consistently winning medals worldwide.

Canada now stands on the verge of establishing itself as an excellent niche player in the highly competitive wine world. But because the Canadian wine industry has only recently come of age, we have an obscure reputation internationally. Many Canadians, also, are unaware of the transformation of Canadian wines over the past decade. There has been intensive innovation and much investment in high-quality, low-yielding vineyard sites, new technology and modern vinification techniques. Many wineries are as well

equipped as any in the world. The vineyards, however, (with some exceptions) are works in progress. Many are just 10 years old or even younger. There's no real history of knowing what grows best where. So far, considering how young the vineyards are, wines from Canada have been amazingly good. Now, while you certainly can't pluck any old Canadian wine off a shelf and be certain of delight, there is an opportunity to acknowledge that a young vineyard area can produce top-quality wines given the same level of investment, skill and passion as European and other vineyards.

Wine is unique in the sense that the top 25 international brands combined represent less than eight percent of the global market, illustrating the extremely fragmented nature of the world wine industry. With a plethora of labels from which to choose, branding is an important factor in consumers' wine purchases. However, branding is more than just package design. Wineries need to create a distinctive character and meaning for every level of their wines while remaining true to their brand essence.

Relative to other countries, Canadians consume a disproportionate amount of imported wine: roughly 60 percent of total

consumption, compared to less than 20 percent in most wine-growing regions of the world. Matthew Worden, sommelier at Susur Lee's Toronto restaurant Susur, has put together an eclectic wine list with an impressive Canadian selection. While the list at Susur features many of the great wines of other regions, Matthew gets a special buzz from Canadian wines, in part because he sees them as "right up there" in value. Matthew likes to select a Henry of Pelham 1998 Cabernet-Merlot or a Malivoire Old Vines Foch and match it to Susur's rare venison/spiced foie gras/chile lime confit/radish salad course. He admits that Canadian wines take some "hard selling", but it's difficult for him to suppress his enthusiasm for the Canadian wines on Susur's list. Matthew says that the quality of Canada's best wines surprises many, but more and more people are discovering the equation of Canadian wine and quality.

If we've learned anything from John Howard's experience it would have to be that Canada has enormous potential as a wine producer, and that it is time our industry was recognized as a serious player on the world stage. Time for a little Vineland Estates Sauvignon Blanc, anyone? ☞