

Cottage Country Wine Festival

By Gordon Stimmell ~ GORD ON GRAPES
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BUCKHORN, Ont. - A recent trip to the Fiesta Buckhorn wine festival in cottage country provided a glimpse of Canadian growers bravely pushing the wine envelope against our savage winters.

Most have heard about the hardy dreamers playing pioneer and putting up edgy wineries in Prince Edward County, where it's far colder than Toronto.

But who would believe growing new clones of vines that can survive minus 30 celcius winters in the Kawarthas, or north of Quebec city along the St. Lawrence River where minus 43 celcius is the normal low point of the year?

To put this in perspective, prolonged bouts of minus 25 celcius are enough to rock the existence of most vines, if not kill them right down to the roots, as we rediscovered in Niagara over the last two winters — unless the vines are patiently buried below soil or a natural massive snow cover.

Now new varieties developed in Minnesota are being tested in experimental vineyards near Peterborough by self-styled "Little Fat Wino" Larry Paterson, the guiding light behind the Fiesta Buckhorn wine fest.

The vines were planted mostly in 2002 on the property of Peterborough medical officer of health, Dr. Garry Humphreys. These disease-resistant and winter-hardy vines may some day allow viticulture to spread into vast inhospitable regions across Canada.

"I want to make \$8 or \$10 blended wines from vines people can grow even up in Sudbury," says Paterson. In the same young test plot are pinot gris vines planted in 2000 that survived minus 30 celcius last winter with no damage.

Also visiting the vineyard was Quebec experimentalist Anthony Carone, who grows frontenac, landot and cabernet severnyi hybrids in Lanoraie, a small town on the St. Lawrence, northeast of Montreal.

"I do not have to bury my vines with earth to protect them in winter," says Carone. "We have three feet or more of snow which does the trick." His Carone Vineyard three-variety red is quite robust and tasty, with a delicate smoky aroma.

Further south in Quebec, in the Townships near the Vermont border, world-class icewines are being sculpted at Le Vignoble Chapelle Ste. Agnes, in Sutton. Henrietta Antony and son John started the winery in 1998 when mom, an antiques dealer, retired and built a Romanesque chapel using stone masons from France.

We tasted the stunning Chapelle Ste. Agnes wines with winemaker John during a below-ground visit to the all-Canadian wine cellar of the posh Elmhurst Resort on Rice Lake. All three icewines are rich, with prices to match, and only come in slim 200-millilitre bottles.

The Chapelle 2001 Vidal Icewine (\$57, rating 94/100) picked in mid-December has rich apricot and peach intensity in great balance. The Vendange Tardive 2001 Geisenheim (\$54, 91) is a late-harvest white with lovely honeyed peach flavours. They also make a rare "straw wine," Vin de Paille 2001 (\$66, 93), with fresh strawberry, apricot and butterscotch spiciness. The grapes are dried on trays (instead of the traditional straw) after picking, and not pressed until shrivelling has made the grapes almost raisin-like in intensity.

Back at the Buckhorn wine festival, 50 wineries poured wine for 3,000 cottage country visitors. This relaxed, rural fair is held at the Buckhorn community centre building and 11 smaller walk-through cabins each anointed with quaint cottage nameplates such as "Raccoon" and "Timberwolf."

For me, it was another chance to try the latest miracles from Prince Edward County and assess whether the wines that so many dreams are made of are finally coming into their own. Many County wineries are still blending Niagara grapes into their wines while they wait for their own vines to reach the needed three years of age to produce drinkable wine.

My focus was on estate-grown wines, rather than these blends. These were the best wines I encountered, and all are only available at the wineries.

The newly opened Black Prince Winery poured a "First Crush" 2003 Auxxerois (\$14.95, 87) with spicy honey, acacia and citrus flavours. And Waupoos Estate showed a 2002 Vidal (\$14.25, 88) that's a zingy dry white, with grapefruit and spicy lime zestiness.

Carmela Estate, with Norman Hardie as winemaker, has done a solid 2002 Cabernet Franc (\$18.95, 87) with nice cedar-laced raspberry character, a classy step up from several very green-edged baco noirs from Prince Edward County that I tasted.

The Grange of Prince Edward County is brand new and won't have 100 per cent County fruit for two more years, but the 2003 Riesling (\$14.95, 88) shows refreshing floral citrus notes — but it's 90 per cent Niagara fruit, so this was no surprise. In contrast, By Chadsey's Cairns, opened last June, has a lovely estate-grown 2002 Riesling (\$16, 87), with floral acacia, lemon and lime spiciness.

And I was delighted by Huff Estates 2003 Chardonnay (\$15.95, 87), their only 100 per cent home-grown wine, with smoky lemony apple and bracing acidity. Winemaker Frederic Picard is aiming some day for a red Bordeaux blend and a Blanc de Blancs, a sparkling wine made from 100 per cent chardonnay.

I tasted several lean gamay noirs that were less than inspiring, so the noble ambition of turning Prince Edward County into Canada's new Burgundy with world class pinot noir remains for the moment a chimera awaiting warmer winters.