

Is Ontario Beaune-ified

Every year, as part of Cuvee, a.k.a. Ontario's Academy Awards of Wine, there is an event reserved for industry professionals, dubbed the 'Experts Tasting.' Recognition is doled out to media /promoters of the Ontario wine industry and a themed wine tasting is conducted. This grape diva of choice this year was Chardonnay, which has a long history in the province. The first Ontario wine made from the varietal was in 1955.

As the tasting progressed, a presenter suggested that we need a term to denote that our wines are made in the Côte de Beaune model. One such idea was to dub the wines as 'Beaune-ified.'

Now, I will readily admit that I have compared many an Ontario wine to a Chablis, Chassagne or Vosne in my writings. But this started me thinking. Do we actually need to use a meter stick to measure Ontario's quality? In doing so, does it actually help, or hinder, our wines?

Recently, I was a member of the tasting panel for the International Cool Climate Chardonnay Symposium (i4c). After sampling an array of fifty Ontario Chards, I was convinced more than ever, that we do make wines which approximate the Burgundian model - fresh acids, elegance, and not overtly oaked.

Why? Similarities! In broad terms, both are cool climate growing regions. The common enemy is rain and frost and much rejoicing comes to pass with a dry, frost free year. Slopes are mutual. Limestone (more so in PEC) and clay are the dominant soils in both. And even though Burgundy has a head start of, oh, 500 plus years when it comes to growing Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, the clones, that have been propagated in Ontario, originate from France.

According to Norm Hardie, "a comparative term helps immensely via associating quality and style." His namesake winery's Chardonnay recently received high praise from Wine and Spirits Magazine at the Seriously Cool Chardonnay Tasting in New York. According to the Editor, Josh Greene, "it was long in flavour, complex and didn't have any lasting oak flavour character in the finish. That it was more about the nature of the soil rather than the wood, really appealed to me." This is a definitive reference to the Burgundian style.

Paul Pender, Tawse's winemaker, and producer of some Niagara's finest Pinots also agrees. "Yes. I think comparisons are good in the sense that they give us a reference point. I think in a blind tasting we could learn a lot about Niagara Pinots and sometimes we could be pleasantly surprised."

On the flip side, François Morissette, owner of the new Pearl-Morissette winery in Vineland, specialists in Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, has a different standpoint. Before returning home to Canada, François worked at many famous Burgundian estates, including Domaines Jacques-Frédéric Mugnier, Roulot and Gouges. "Absolutely not; it promotes the value of Burgundy wines rather than emphasizing the specificity of Ontario wines. It is also based on generalities developed over hundred years of extremely varied viticulture practices and associated to each quoted terroir. Hence it should be used as a mere stylistic reference and not a comparative tool."

So if our styles are similar, have we found an Ontario terroir? Norm believes that PEC has. "It is a homogeneous area, with Pinot Noir and Chardonnay being the calling cards. Niagara is a lot more sight specific, so it is hard to group as a region, especially with the myriad of grapes that are grown."

Another issue which comes to bear in Ontario, as in Burgundy, is the ripening of the grapes. If we are unable or unwilling to ripen the grapes properly, either via lower yields, long hang times, etc... so as to attain physiological ripeness, terroir doesn't matter. In other words, pick the grapes that ripen consistently, so as to showcase the place of origin. Is one to believe that a bell pepper scented red shows its birthright? Varietal selection is also paramount. Norm doesn't pull punches when he says that, "Cabernet Sauvignon should be abandoned. As for other grapes he believes in, Cabernet Franc and Riesling are his choice." Herein, I totally agree. Tasting after tasting has shown that Cab Franc is vastly more consistent than Cabernet Sauvignon, and even Merlot.

As for Gamay, the other red Burgundian varietal, it, too, is linked to Ontario. Outside both regions, no one really takes it seriously. Without hyperbole, the best rendition ever made, was the 13th Street Winery 1999 Gamay Reserve. It garnered more attention than Lady Ga-Ga in an eggshell. According to Ken Douglas, who made every vintage of that wine, until 2007, "there are a few of us who really believe in the grape- Malivoire, Cave Springs, Château des Charmes and Henry of Pelham. We have even sent our wines over to France and they have been all been knocked out, whether it be a \$12 basic Gamay or reserve at \$25. We do it better than Beaujolais."

Putting similarities and differences aside, what are the pros of making wines in both locales? According to Norm, "it is quite nice dealing with the older vines in Burgundy. In PEC we are developing an entire region. We have tremendous soils and discoveries ahead of us." François also agrees. "Every region has its advantages and inconveniences. Vine age makes a huge difference wherever you are. I'm also a bit biased when it comes to Pinot Noir as I had the opportunity to make six vintages of Musigny Grand Cru. On a local level, I haven't yet experienced anything remotely approximating this level of complexity. But, then again, we are on a baby footing."

Young, Ontario might be, and for now, comparisons might be necessary. But who knows. Maybe one day, other fledgling wine countries will use Niagara-on-the-Lake, Beamsville Bench or PEC as reference points for their wines. Here is an encouraging thought. China's wine industry is in its infancy and is destined to become a behemoth in the years and decades to come.

The following wines are a selection from the 2009 vintage, excellent for Pinot and Chardonnay in both Niagara and Burgundy.

White

93 Colaneri Paese Chardonnay 2009, Niagara (\$34.95)

This is a stunning Niagara Chardonnay which tantalizes the olfactory senses with honey, figs, pineapple, bananas, spice and vanilla. That same tsunami of sexiness is also found on the taste buds as well as a streak of minerality, which runs through the middle. Full bodied, there is excellent length and uplifting acidity. Drink until 2017. (ES)

93 Domaine des Malandes Chablis Les Clos Grand Cru 2009

Here is a ripe Chablis full of apples, honey, spice and light tropical fruit accents. It is full bodied with lots of bright acidity as well as a somewhat creamy texture. All and all, it is approachable right now, but will improve for another 7 or 8 years.

91 Servin Chablis Vaillons 1er Cru 2009

The Servin Vaillons 1er Cru is a beautiful Chablis with aromas of white peaches, anise, apples and lemon peel encapsulating a core of minerals. Medium bodied, the crisp acidity helps to carry the wonderful finale, while at the same time giving ageability. Drink until 2017. The old adage that oysters and Chablis is the perfect match might seem cliché, but I can think of a no better partner for this wine.

91 Ravine Vineyard Chardonnay Reserve 2009, Niagara (\$40)

Here is a superb Chardonnay with lots of complexity and elegance. Vanilla, apple, caramel, peach, and citrus are in the mix. The concentrated mid palate carries the fruit and oak on the long finish and the refreshing acidity brings everything into definition.

90 Domaine Roux Père et Fils Chassagne-Montrachet les Chaumes 1^{er} Cru 2009 (\$38.95)

A 1er cru for under \$40! Buy it as it is a no brainer. Ripe, it is medium bodied with vanilla, apple, citrus, minerals and stone fruit qualities. The length is excellent and it is ready to go.

89 Domaine Michel Juillot Rully 2009 (\$28)

Rully is located in the value region of Côte Chalonnaise. Stylistically, its wines are similar to Côte de Beaune as there is a good amount of clay and limestone in the soil. In this wine, we have minerals, apples, spice, peach, honey and citrus flavours. Medium stature, crisp acid and a solid persistency make for a great drink.

88 Flatrock Cellars The Rusty Shed Chardonnay 2009, Twenty Mile Bench (\$24.95)

This extremely youthful Chardonnay it shy right now, but apples, citrus, spice, honey, toast and minerals have emerged. There is depth as well as very good length and a refreshing personality. Try it with oysters Rockefeller, or a salmon filet, in a beurre blanc sauce.

88 Pondview Bella Terra Barrel Fermented Chardonnay 2009, Niagara (\$24)

There is a wonderful balance between the oak and the fruit- each works in tandem with the other. Mid weight, the combination of apple, vanilla, spice and caramel linger on the palate. It is ready to drink, so enjoy it with chicken tikka masala or cheddar cheese.

Reds

92 Château de la Tour Clos-Vougeot 2009 (\$149)

Yes, it might be pricey, but after all, it is Grand Cru Burgundy from an excellent vintage. There is an almost Californian edge to the wine as it is quite ripe with plums, raisins, dark cherries, violets, smoke and earth. Full bodied, there is a round texture and superb length. It should easily last for decade, if not more.

88 Tawse Grower's Blend Pinot Noir 2009, Niagara Peninsula (\$32)

Sourced from multiple vineyards throughout the Peninsula and aged in 20% new barrels, the wine sings with a chorus of plums, black raspberries, violets, spice and vanilla. The palate is elegant, but still a little disjointed, so let it rest in the cellar until the end of the year and then drink it until 2014.

88 Colaneri Virtuoso Pinot Noir 2009, Niagara Peninsula (\$34)

Virtuoso is a mid weight Pinot with a complex of nose of plums, toast, cherries, cocoa and earth. Supple tannins and very good length round out the mix.

87 Maison Champy Bourgogne Signature 2009 (\$19.95)

It is usually hard to find a solid Pinot at the regional level in Burgundy. But this one delivers the goods. Without a doubt, the great growing conditions in '09 helped. A personality of strawberries, cherries and earth are constructed on an easy drinking frame, with very good length.

87 Domaine Michel Juillot Bourgogne Rouge 2009 (\$23)

Here is another great little basic Bourgogne. Raspberries, cherries, strawberries and plum are all present in this easy drinker.