

New teaching winery to be learning hub

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For nine years, Niagara College has taught aspiring winemakers the craft of fermenting grapes into delightful drink in an old, cramped barn.

Vintages made by wine and viticulture technician students were sold in a small retail store a building away.

That's all about to change this fall.

The college's wine school will finally have a winery under one roof.

Once it opens in November, this attractive 7,500-square-foot stone building at the Niagara-on-the-Lake campus is going to serve as one giant learning laboratory for about 60 winemaking and 24 wine business management students.

"We're always trying to improve our education," said the college's winery and vineyard manager, Steve Gill, who recently gave me a tour of the new building.

"We're educators first." There's a full wine production area on the bottom floor with space to crush grapes and house dozens of steel tanks and oak barrels to let wine age. Nearby, there's a small classroom, a wine chemistry lab and several freezers for students to conduct experiments.

All of it will help students fully engage in the hands-on course, and allow the college to do more applied research to help Ontario's grape growers and wineries, Gill said.

This \$3.2-million building, officially called the Wine Visitor and Education Centre, is not just for students, but for the public to learn about wine.

Most of the top floor will serve as a giant wine-tasting room and boutique and education centre to school people in Ontario wine. Explanations will be given of the distinct grape-growing areas and the meaning of VQA -- Vintners Quality Alliance -- that ensures wine quality and that what's in the bottle is 100 per cent grown in the province.

Bottles from nearly every winery in Ontario will be on display.

The learning centre -- the first of its kind in Niagara's wine country -- will be able to give visitors the big picture about how winemaking has evolved in Ontario and where it's headed. That's something that will be a big asset to local wine tourism.

"I think what it's going to do is we're a hub with spokes going out to the industry," Gill said.

"We're hoping to generate more interest with not only young people but with people in general who may or may not think much about wine."

While they're learning at the boutique, tourists will be able to enjoy a breathtaking view of the teaching winery's 40-acre vineyard and the Niagara Escarpment in the distance. A large wraparound patio should also entice tipplers to take a glass outside and enjoy surroundings.

The college's students will use the new winery production space for this fall's grape harvest.

The winery will produce up to 6,000 cases per year.

Have news on the grape and wine industry to share? Contact Monique at [Follow on twitter/ vinesandwine](#)