

The Next Crop



In an industry where maturity is paramount, Canada's winemaking ranks are ripe with young talent

by Alan McGinty

There's a whole new generation of winemakers out there, and they've got views. Many were not even born when Donald Ziraldo and Karl Kaiser launched Inniskillin in 1975, kick-starting the modern Canadian wine industry. Here's a look at the country's emerging generation of winemakers and the wines they like to make - and drink.

Kristine Kraemer

Consulting winemaker

From: Hamilton, Ont.

Age: 29

After five years at Jackson-Triggs Niagara, Kraemer recently moved to a town northwest of Toronto and has become a freelance consultant to several Ontario wineries. In her time at Vincor, she worked with winemakers from all over the world. "It's all influenced me in various ways, but I think I ultimately keep a grassroots, Canadian tweak on things. I'm very focused."

Kristine used to have a more generous view of what works in Niagara, but the last couple of years have been tough. "So even though I'm a big believer in merlot," she says, "I think it definitely needs to be tailored to certain sites. But when it's a good year, it's very good. Chardonnay does really well here. It shines. And it varies from all the different terroir we have in Niagara. Riesling is great as well. I've done a lot of good work with gewürztraminer too. I'm really happy with how the J-T 2003 Grand Reserve Chardonnay is drinking well right now, and the 2002 Grand Reserve Meritage is still strong. That was a great year for reds."

Kristine names Fielding's Pinot Grigio as a local favourite: "I was very impressed. It had a lot of concentration and more substance than an Italian."

Jason James

Sumac Ridge, Okanagan

From: North Bay, Ont.

Age: 35

"When I came out here for the interview I thought it was just beautiful and I really wanted to work here," says Jason James about heading west in 2005. Before being appointed Sumac Ridge's assistant winemaker in Summerland, B.C., James was head winemaker at Niagara's Thomas & Vaughan.

What differences between the Okanagan and Niagara are most apparent? "The big reds are really good out here," he says, adding diplomatically that "there's still quite a few good big reds in Ontario. There, you need to manage the viticulture a little tighter to get the ripeness up. It's still hard to compete because the growing season is a little longer here and the brix [grape sugar levels] come in much higher.

"The merlots and cab sauvs here don't have the tinge of greenness that sometimes is too dominant in Ontario wines. I've been surprised by the zinfandel and also a petit verdot as a single varietal. I think there'll be a little more experimentation with these types of grapes in the Okanagan because they seem to do well."

For all his talk of Okanagan big reds, James opts for a white as his B.C. pick:

Lake Breeze Vineyards 2004 Semillon.

Jeff Kah
Pelee Island Winery
From: Kingsville, Ont.
Age: 23

Canada's youngest winemaker already has years of experience under his belt. Kah started working at Pelee Island Winery when he was just 15 and became a winemaker in September 2004. He has also worked in Rhinegau, Germany (with Georg Breuer), and at Amity in Oregon.

Kah is true to his German roots: "Riesling and pinot [noir] are my passions. At Pelee Island, we're pretty Germanic in our style. We try to extend our cold white fermentations to bring

out a bit more of the aromatics and fruit."

But Kah is also bullish about big reds, and he thinks Pelee Island and Erie North Shore have an advantage over Niagara. "With our warmer temperatures, there's no reason we shouldn't have that step up in quality of merlot, cab sauv and cab franc. For these Bordeaux blends, Niagara is a bit greener. We're almost there, but I think we can step it up. You'll see that especially in some of our '05s. Niagara was really hit again in the winter of 2005, but we still got merlot, sauv blanc, gewürz - and full crops too."

With over 500 acres of vineyards, Pelee Island is a big producer that focuses on mass market wines, but Kah has plans to launch his own "special reserve" higher quality label. "We are definitely going to come out with some higher end stuff in the very near future."

Kah recommends the pinot noir from Inniskillin, Flat Rock Cellars and Lailey Vineyards: "These guys do a good job with it."

Frédéric Picard
Huff Estates Winery, Prince Edward County
From: Paris, France
Age: 34

"The biggest challenge in Canada - we have to work harder in the vineyard"

During and after his studies, Frédéric Picard worked at a small winery in Burgundy where everything was done by hand. A 74-year-old colleague - who'd started when he was 14 - told Picard that "you make good wine with good grapes. If you don't work enough in the vineyard, you can try whatever you want, but you won't get good wine."

Picard isn't put off by the extraordinary measures he must take in the County: "We have to bury our vines in the winter. Then we have to hope for enough snow cover. I think this is the biggest challenge in Canada - we have to work harder in the vineyard."

Though he learned his craft in Burgundy, home of legendary chardonnays, Picard says, "Ontario makes beautiful chardonnays, and also great rieslings, and pinot gris. There's enough time to ripen, and the effects of Ontario's terroir makes wines with high acidity and minerality, especially in Prince Edward County."

Picard makes no pretense of preferring Ontario's whites, but offers advice for rescuing an under-ripe red: "If you decant for a few hours, a lot of the greenness goes away and the fruit comes back. You also might want to wait longer before opening it. I'm not sure you can get rid of all the greenness, but you will definitely improve it by aging and decanting."

Picard's own 2004 barrel-aged chardonnay is terrific, but he admits that he is "never disappointed by a chardonnay from Jean-Pierre Colas at Peninsula Ridge."

Jordan Harris
Niagara College Teaching Winery
From: Erin, Ont.
Age: 25

Most students leave school when they're finished, but not Harris. Three years after finishing his studies, he's assistant winemaker at the award-winning Niagara College Teaching Winery in Ontario.

When asked about Ontario's best varietals, Harris picks typical cool climate favourites like pinot noir, cabernet franc, riesling and chardonnay, then he added an unexpected choice: "I think that we can produce the world's best gamay."

British wine guru Jancis Robinson calls gamay an "inferior" grape, but Harris disagrees: "I think gamay can be the grape of the future in Ontario. It's under-appreciated," he says. "There are several Niagara wineries that are doing a superb job with gamay. Kacaba, Thirteenth Street, Cave Spring, Maleta Winery. If gamay is not treated as an entry-level wine, it can be great. Most people will just put it through a carbonic maceration, and make it very, very light in colour and structure. It has ageability and it's something I think we can do better than anywhere else in the world. What's so beautiful about the gamay here is that it will have that nice backbone of acidity even after you've put it through malo, macerated it for however long and let it age in the barrel 18 months. It preserves a lot of its really ripe, fresh, red berry fruit that's just elegant and delicious. I think it can make a very complex wine."

Harris nominates the Stratus Gamay Noir 2001 as his Niagara choice - and adds that on a recent trip to Australia, a group of winemakers, viticulturalists and retailers deemed it the best Canadian wine that they had ever tried. In fact, the Aussies liked all the wines he poured, including the 2002 Osoyoos Larose

and the 2002 Jackson-Triggs Okanagan Proprietors Grand Reserve Shiraz: "Quite impressive wines," says Harris, "but the gamay was tops."

Tom Green

Lakeview Cellars and Birchwood Estates, Niagara
From: South Africa.
Age: 30

When he was 14, Tom Green immigrated from South Africa with his family - their decision was a toss-up between Australia or Canada. Canada's "yes" came through a week earlier, so they came here.

Green started at Lakeview as his placement through the Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute (CCOVI) at Brock University, stayed on as assistant winemaker, and was promoted just two years later when the winemaker retired. "I was basically thrown to the wolves," he says. But he handled it well: Diamond Estate wines purchased Birchwood in 2000, and in 2001 they asked Tom to be winemaker at Birchwood too.

So what works best in Niagara? "Some say cabernet franc is the best for Ontario, others say cabernet sauvignon. But I think with the winters we've been having and the short crops, people have to re-think. People have been experimenting with syrah, zinfandel, sangiovese and barbera, but I think they'll be moving away from these sensitive varieties. Riesling's a great variety for Ontario, very hardy. I'd love to make more sauvignon blanc, but I've just never been able to find enough grapes - you get some great sauvignon blanc one year, and then winter damage just breaks your heart the next."

True to his love of sauvignon blanc, Green chooses Vineland Estates Sauvignon Blanc 2004 - "an excellent wine" - as his favourite Niagara product.

Brooke Blair

Jackson-Triggs, Oliver
From: Coonawarra, South Australia
Age: 27

Brooke Blair's wine inspiration was pretty close to home: "My dad is a viticulturalist in Coonawarra, so I was exposed from a young age." Brooke's first winery posting was in 2002 at Australia's Hollick Wines and her next job was at Vincor in Oliver, B.C.

"I was really surprised with the quality when I first came over," she says. "Canadian wines are really hard to find in Australia. Canada can give other New World countries a run for their money, that's for sure. Merlot is done very well. It's the most widely-planted variety in the valley."

Unsurprisingly, Blair's favourite red is shiraz, and her favourite white is another southern hemisphere star: sauvignon blanc. "With sauv blanc, you can get such an array of flavours depending on when you pick it. Pick it early and you get green and herbaceous character; wait longer and you get fuller tropical flavours," Blair says.

She is also pleased that more wineries in the Okanagan are now doing shiraz. "It's not hard to make a big red here, which is what I think shiraz is supposed to be." Blair thinks B.C. shiraz compares favourably to Australia, "but I think Ontario is just not warm enough."

Blair's preferred B.C. bottle is a surprise: "The Inniskillin Zinfandel is fantastic. It's a brilliant wine. There's not much of it in the Okanagan, but what there is compares very well with the Californian ones."

Derek Kontkanen

Jackson-Triggs, Oliver
From: Midland, Ont.
Age: 27

Kontkanen became assistant winemaker at Jackson Triggs in Oliver, B.C. in 2004, following six years with Inniskillin in Niagara. As a result, he knows both east and west: "For Ontario, the strongest varieties are pinot noir, chardonnay and riesling. Cab franc has the potential to be very good," he says.

What's holding it back? "Hard to say; could be the vineyard site, the particular clone used, vineyard practices or winemaking technique."

Of the Okanagan, he sounds a bit more enthusiastic: "Shiraz is a big one out here and we're seeing more and more of it. It's definitely on an upswing. Also sauvignon blanc works very well here, though it tends to be more in the tropical fruit style because of the warmer climate. There's a little bit of malbec - after a year in oak it's just phenomenal. The regular Bordeaux varieties - merlot and cabernet sauvignon - do very well in the southern Okanagan."

Sticking with Vincor, Kontkanen nominates affiliate Sumac Ridge's Black Sage Merlot 2002 as B.C.'s best: "I thought it was phenomenal," he says.

Stephanie Leinemann

Calona Vineyards, Kelowna
From: Kelowna, BC.
Age: 29

Leinemann grew up the Okanagan, but it wasn't until she lived in Germany's wine producing Rheinland-Pfalz for six months that she developed an interest in wine. Upon returning home, unsure what to do, she looked around "and that's when it dawned on me that I live in wine country! It took me about two seconds to say, 'Hey, I can make wine.'"

So Leinemann headed east to study at CCOVI and landed a job at Calona in August 2003. She stood out right away, with awards for the 2003 pinot gris, 2003 pinot blanc and the 2003 Sandhill Small Lots Syrah - which won Best Red Wine in the Canadian Wine Awards. "[Winemaker] Howard Soon has been a

fantastic mentor," says Leinemann. "He gets me out to the vineyards as much as possible near picking time. He's taught me that you might have all the right numbers, but if the flavour's not there, it's not ready."

Leinemann takes a cooler climate view of the Okanagan: "Aromatics like riesling and gewürztraminer are more consistent here. Pinot gris is good too. Cab[ernet Sauvignon] definitely needs a lot of heat - so unless it's down in the south [Okanagan] and we have an inferno summer, it's sometimes hard to ripen. Merlot does better, so we see more cab-merlot blends than cab sauv on its own."

Among the local competition, Leinemann likes the riesling from Quails' Gate and, with a nod to a cool climate red, the Platinum Reserve Pinot Noir from CedarCreek.

Richard Roberts

Stratus Winery, Niagara

From: St. Catharines, Ont.

Age: 24

Richard Roberts' CCOVI thesis - analyzing grape quality in chardonnay musqué - won him a scholarship from the American Society of Enology and Viticulture. Soon after graduation he became assistant winemaker at Stratus Winery.

Stratus's winemaker J.L. Groux is big on blends, and Roberts is involved in their selection. "Blending is very systematic, but we do it totally blind and completely random," he says. "So Stratus Red will depend on what did well in the vineyards that year."

For his Ontario picks, Roberts offers the usual hats-off to riesling and, "if you can get it through the winter, sauvignon blanc - but you'd really have to find the right site. In reds, cab franc is terrific. In really good years you get a lot of ripe black fruit flavours, but also the herbaceous spiciness."

Acknowledging that there have only been two hot summers out of five since the turn of the century, Roberts says that "some grape growers do an exceptional job in even sub-par years, and those grapes can produce good wines." Echoing Frédéric Picard in the County, he adds that "99 per cent of what you get in the winery relies totally on grape growing."

Roberts says rieslings from Cave Spring are "consistently great" and he nominates Lakeview Cellars 2002 Reserve Merlot as an "exceptional" Ontario red.

Alan McGinty is a Toronto-based freelance writer. He writes about wine for several different publications and is a regular visitor to wine regions like Niagara, the Okanagan and Spain, which he thinks offers some of the best value fine wines around, especially Priorat and Ribero del Duero. www.alanmcginty.com
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