WINE REGIONS

THE WINES OF THE NIAGARA PENINSULA

With over 1000 hectares of vineyards, the Niagara Peninsula is the largest and oldest wine region in Canada. Located in Southern Ontario, it is bounded by Lake Ontario to the north, the Niagara River to the east, the Welland River to the south and the Lake Erie to the west.

The local wine industry did not really take off until the mid 1970's when Donald Ziraldo and Karl Kaiser started their respective wineries and planted the first vinifera vines in the region. Since then, the industry has grown rapidly and the quality of the wines has reached a very high standard considering such a young winemaking tradition.

Niagara wines first gained international recognition in 1991 when a bottle of Icewine(this ice wine was created for Grand Prix d'Honneur de Vinexpo in Bordeaux. While the region continues to produce international quality wines, Niagara deserves a lot more attention for its remarkable diversity.

Niagara's climate is considered a cool climate region similar to such as Riesling, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, Gewurztraminer, Pinot Gris and Cabernet Sauvignon. The moderating effects of Lake Ontario and the Niagara Escarpment influence the climate. Escarpment, creates a moderate temperatured zone facing the spring and summer growing seasons, and protects the vineyards from the winter winds.

In 2006, the industry recognized Niagara's diverse terroir with the establishment of two regional appellations Niagara Escarpment and Niagara on the Lake, as well as 10 sub appellations. Today, there are 10 wineries in Niagara, 9 in the Niagara Escarpment (also known as The Bench) and 41 in Niagara on the Lake.

Wineries to Visit

During my week in the region, I had the chance to visit 13 wine wineries. Here are my impressions of each of these wineries.

Niagara Escarpment

Flat Rock Cellars

Located on the Niagara Escarpment on the Twenty Mile Bench appellation, Flat Rock Cellars is a family owned winery. Ross Wilson and his wife Jackie purchased the property in 2000 and family owned winery has 60 acres of vines planted primarily with Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Riesling with a small parcel of Gewurztraminer. The first commercial vintage dates from 2003 and the first wine was a Riesling. Ross is a self-taught winemaker and he has made all of the grapes in the cellar in the beginning. All the transfers are done by gravity. I had the chance to taste a lot of the wines produced by Flat Rock and I must say that the wines are of a very high quality. Ross's Riesling, Chardonnay, Gewurztraminer, pinot noir and sparkling wine (Cuvee Jackie) Cellars is a must! flatrockcellars.com

Westcott Vineyards

Westcott Vineyards is a family estate owned by Ivan Westcott and Carolyn Kruse. They planted their first vines in 1998 and released their first commercial vintage in 2003. Since then, from 2011 to 2018, the estate acquired an additional 28 acres by purchasing the Kaiser Vineyard. The owners philosophy for making great wines is to produce quality grapes and let yields and to minimize intervention in the winemaking process. Ivan and Carolyn are very passionate about wines have been crafted since 2004 by Laura Kaiser, the chardonnay and pinot noir winemaker. The pinot noir and chardonnay are vibrant and complex. The traditional method sparkling wine is very good and the Riesling is a very good value. Westcott Vineyards The prices are very reasonable considering the quality of the wines. westcottvineyards.com

Hermit Estate

Hermit Estate is owned by Graham Bonacci, a businessman with a passion for wine who purchased the property located at the Beamsville Bench in one of the best sites of the Niagara Escarpment Grape were already being cultivated at the early 70's. In 1976 Graham decided to start his own winery. The winery produced its first commercial vintage in 1978 and the first wines were just some 40 cases. The first vintage dates from 1978. A big fan of Burgundian wines, Graham traveled to Italy's Lucca about four generations and then invented in Amarcord to produce a Pinot Noir wine. Today, the winery produces 2,000 cases of Pinot Noir and the wines are produced in mostly Medium-oak and cold fermentation. The wines are handled by Sonya Malcolm, Malcolm's winemaker. The production is confidential but of premium quality. I really like the Chardonnay and the Pinot Noir. The Chardonnay is fermented in stainless steel and aged in aging. Wines in discovery capsule if you don't know them are. Just ask for Graham, he is very friendly and very knowledge. He is a true wine ambassador who has followed his dreams to produce very unique wines! hermitestatewines.com

Tawse

Established by businessman Moses Tawse, an avid fan of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from Bourgogne, Tawse is undoubtedly one of Niagara's most renowned wineries. Tawse has been producing wines since 2000 and the first commercial vintage was released in 2003. Since 2008 with the goal of growing Bourgeoisie wine lovers from Europe to the Niagara Escarpment. The 187 acres of vineyards are managed organically and biodynamically and the wines are produced in a Burgundian style. Tawse's winemaker Paul Pender is a very talented winemaker in Ontario. The winery's wines are delicate and elegant, in stainless steel and the Chardonnay is French oak barrels aging will assist. All red wines are fermented in oak barrels and aged in French oak barrels. The wines are very well balanced and have a very good aging potential. Tawse is environmentally friendly. The wine stores ageing by gravity from harvesting to bottling. A professional lounge system has reduced the use of traditional forms of cooling by 80%. Tawse has a very good value wine called Quarter Bench. Tawse's Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Riesling, Cabernet Franc and Sauvignon are the common varietals in their winery and ageing wines in a very affordable price, superb Riesling and Cabernet Franc. I very nice Gamay as well as some very good Icewine. Tawse's wines are very well made. Tawse's Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Riesling, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. Tawse also produces cider and spirits. A wonderful tasting room is a very nice visit to the Niagara region. tawsewinery.ca

Domaine Queylus

Founded by a group of believers with passion for wine including Hungarian Imrich Szentes, Domaine Queylus is a relatively young winery. Imrich Szentes, the owner of the Beamsville Bench vineyard released wines in 2011. Located at the top of the Niagara Escarpment, the estate cultivates nearly 35 acres of vines and grows primarily pinot noir, cabernet franc, chardonnay and merlot. Imrich is a very nice guy and he is very passionate about his wines. The winemaker Thomas Bachelder produces wines on course to the hands of Emily Moses and Gerald Ottenhof, the winemaker and production manager. The Pinot Noir and Chardonnay wines are just amazing (especially the 2011 Chardonnay). The Pinot Noir is very good and the Chardonnay is very good and delicious. Very out of great elegance. queylus.com

Chudleys Cellars

Chudleys Cellars wines are very some of my favorites in the region. I had the opportunity during my visit to taste the entire range of wines and Chudley's produces some of the most delicate wines in the region. Chudleys Cellars is a family owned winery located on the Twenty Mile Bench appellation. A big fan of Burgundy wines, he decided to grow only Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The winery produces 2,000 cases of Pinot Noir and 1,000 cases of Chardonnay. The winery is located in Winona on the western edge of Niagara wine country. Licensing has opened the doors in 2009 to 2011. Tasting of produces wines from a variety of appellations: Lincoln Lakeshore, St. Catharines, Niagara on the Lake, Niagara Escarpment, Niagara Peninsula. Chudleys Cellars experimented by all the wines tasted and the Spirit consistent characteristics again the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are superb. The Riesling complain, especially The Dark, aged in a sherry cemetery, the Gewurztraminer is very good and the Cabernet Franc is very good. The Chardonnay is very good. Chudleys Cellars wines are very well made. Chudleys Cellars Riesling is very good and I like it very well. Spiced cemetery gives to the Gewurz Red and Gewurz White, which are absolutely delicious Bordeaux style blends. I also really enjoyed Chudleys Cellars Cabernet Franc. Chudleys Cellars wines are very well made and very good value for price. Chudleys. winesofniagara.com

Leaning Post Wines

Leaning Post Wines is definitely one of the highlights of my visit to Niagara. The winery, founded by Ontario's Jeff Stevens, is located on the Niagara Escarpment. The winery produces only limited numbers of wines, after working as a winemaker for 12 years in the Niagara region, Jeff with his wife Nadia decided to start a virtual winery in 2004 (the date of the first vintage) before finally opening the doors of their winery in 2009. Jeff's wines are very well made and very well balanced. Jeff's Riesling is the winery's flagship wine and it is very good. The Chardonnay is very good and elegant and the fruit has adaptation that cause it could a describe minerals notes. Special mentions for the 2010 Wrightwood Vineyard Chardonnay and the 2010 Rose Vineyard Pinot Noir that again the mineral feeling of terroir is amazing. cloudsnetwork.com

Niagara-on-the-Lake Region

Reif Vineyard

Located in the community of St. Davids in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Reif Vineyard has been a very well known winery for many years. Reif Vineyard is a family owned winery and the winery has been making a lot of the oldest vineyards in the region. The cultivation of Vinifera vines was nevertheless the main activity of the estate. It was not until the second half of the 20th century that the family decided to produce wine. Today, the winery produces 20,000 cases of wine including an aromatic variegated, cabernet franc, merlot, chardonnay and riesling pinot grigio. The winery now has nearly 35 acres of Bordeaux varietal (varietal expected) mainly located in the Niagara-on-the-Lake appellation. The winery is also home to the Niagara Wine Festival and the winery is located in a carriage house, Hernstein House, built in the early 19th century. The winery also has an excellent restaurant where I had the chance to eat, as well as a very nice wine featuring local products. The restaurant is very good and very well made. The Riesling is very good. I really like their Riesling and Cabernet Franc as well as their traditional method sparkling wine. reifwinery.com

Big Head

Located in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Big Head Wines is a family owned and operated winery that really impressed me with its innovation and its high quality and diversity of its wines. The winemaker Ryan Pennycuick is very passionate about his wines and he is very good at his operations, can organic from Pinot. The family incorporated in Canada in the early 90's and Ontario has been producing wine in the region since 1996 till wines are traded following the winemaker's passion for Italian varietals. The winery has 20 acres of vineyards in Niagara-on-the-Lake, an excellent location mainly only with Bordeaux varietal and small parcels of Italian varietals to express the power expression of the varietal. The first vintage dates from 2011, the year in which the winery released its first wines. The winery produces 2,000 cases of wine including a very good Cabernet Franc and 500 cases of different wines, and I enjoyed so many of them. Ryan's favorite wines are Cabernet Franc and I really liked the 2009 range and in particular, the Riesling Pinot Noir, Malbec and Cabernet Franc. Ryan's Cabernet Franc is very good and very well made. Ryan's Cabernet Franc is very good and very well made. bigheadwines.ca

Southbrook Vineyards

Founded in 2004 by Bill Redelmeier, Southbrook was the first winery in Canada to obtain organic certification for its vineyards. Southbrook's winemaking philosophy is based on minimal intervention, calm the property consists of the Niagara Escarpment of formation of limestone, Southbrook's facilities are LEED(R) Gold certified, featuring numerous green initiatives to water management, energy consumption, and waste management. Southbrook's wines are made from organic grapes, are organic and sustainably, and I have spectacular vineyard that also represented winery. Our Chardonnay, Rose, red and Rose sparkling wines called Poetry, some of varietal varietals, are a very good value. southbrook.ca

Strofilia

Located in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Strofilia Vineyards is a winery that has impressed me with its quality and diversity of its wines. The winery is family owned and operated and the winery produces exceptional quality wines. Strofilia was founded in the early 2000's by Sam Dimitriadis, with the goal of producing some of the best wineries in the region. To achieve this, more than 5 of the wineries in the region have been purchased, and the winery now has 40 acres of vineyards in Niagara-on-the-Lake. The winery officially opened to the public in 2009. Strofilia only wines, the winery produces around 2000 cases of wine, which the winery prices its grape varietals (5 out - 5 stars). The priority that Strofilia has given to the production of its wines is very high. The winery has a very good and very efficient winemaking and the handle to the cellar are kept at a constant temperature by mechanical energy. French winemaker Jean Luc Colombo is advice of the Luke Tolley has been making wines for Strofilia since the winery's first vintage. The winemaker Luke Tolley has been making wines for Strofilia since the first year and all of the high quality. Special winemaking goes to the Pinot Noir and Rosato Wines, which are absolutely delicious Bordeaux style blends. I also really enjoyed Strofilia's Cabernet Franc. Strofilia's Rosato and 2010 pinot noir are very good and very good value for price. Strofilia. strofiliawines.com

Two Sisters

Located on the Niagara River sub-appellation in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Two Sisters has quickly built a fine reputation for the quality of its wines. The vineyard was planted in 2007, but it wasn't until 2014 that the estate opened its doors to the public. The first commercialized vintage dates back to 2010. The family estate created by sisters Angela Marotta and Melissa Marotta-Paolicelli now has 130 acres of vineyards, mainly planted with Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Petit Verdot, Chardonnay, Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc. The estate has a beautiful tasting room and a restaurant featuring Italian cuisine. The wines are made by Adam Pearce and are all of very high quality. Two Sisters is best known for its red wines made from Bordeaux grapes. While their Cabernet Franc, Sauvignon, Merlot and Bordeaux blends are very well made (special mention for the Eleventh Post, the most accessible and affordable), I especially liked their traditional method sparkling wines as well as their Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. As for their signature cuvée, Stone Eagle, it is superb, if your wallet allows it ($140). twosistersvineyards.com

Where to stay?

While in the area, I was lucky enough to stay at 124 on Queen, a boutique hotel with a brand new spa in downtown Niagara-on-the-Lake. The newly renovated rooms are beautiful and the staff is very attentive. It is without a doubt one of the most comfortable places to stay close to the vineyards. 124queen.com

Several wineries offer accommodations in the heart of the vineyards, including Vineland Estates, Alvento Winery and 13th Street.

Other recommended accommodations include Riverbend Inn and Inn on the Twenty.

Where to eat?

Niagara is also a destination where the fine-dining offer is constantly growing. During my stay in Niagara-on-the-Lake, I had the chance to dine at Treadwell Restaurant. I can't recommend this design restaurant enough, with its relaxed atmosphere and delicious cuisine. The all-local wine pairing (at my request) was also top notch. A restaurant not to be missed in downtown Niagara-on-the-Lake. treadwellcuisine.com

Of course, many wineries offer fine-dining experiences. The Restaurant at Pearl Morissette is one of the most famous. Personally, I particularly enjoyed my dinner at the restaurant at Ravine Vineyard. Some of the wineries' restaurant to check are, amongst others, Trius, Two Sisters Vineyards, 13th Street Winery, Honsberger Estate, Vineland Estates, and Peller Estate.

I haven't had a chance to eat at any of these restaurants (hopefully next time), but I've heard great things about The Good Earth Food and Wine in Beamsville and Dispatch in St. Catharines.

To learn more and plan your visit

I couldn't finalize this article without emphasizing that Niagara is a top wine tourism destination. Whether you're here for a weekend or your next vacation, the local wineries have everything in place to welcome wine lovers in the best conditions.

If you want to learn more about Niagara wines or plan a visit to the region, I invite you to visit winecountryontario.ca.

This article is a collaboration with Wine Country Ontario.

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