

# Niagara's new winery dares to be different



**BEPPI CROSARIOL**  
WINES AND SPIRITS

The first thing bound to strike you about Stratus Vineyards, the most ambitious new winery to open in Niagara, isn't the wine. It's the label.

Don't care much for labels? Of course you don't. It's the juice that counts. I hear you.

But that's precisely the refreshing thing about the Stratus label. It practically goes out of its way *not* to sell you on the wine.

The small, square sticker is divided into horizontal panels, the bottom coloured plain black (setting off a plainly typed "Stratus" logo), the top depicting long, ribbon-like stratus clouds. It's the kind of thing Mark Rothko might have painted in landscape class.

Certainly, it's a far cry from the vast majority of Canadian wine labels, which range from pretentious (sketches of overwrought new winery buildings) and tacky (gold-foil trim – must be good!) to meaningless ("proprietor's own reserve").

If you're looking for a grape name to reveal a clue as to what's inside Stratus's two flagship products, forget it. The wines are called, rather unhelpfully, Stratus Red and Stratus White.

If it all sounds a little cryptic, it's nothing compared with the mystery that has surrounded the winery for the past four years. The peninsula has been a-gaggle with grapevine gossip about the grand and, until now, secretive project near Niagara-on-the-Lake. ("I hear they're planting malbec. Crazy!")

With the state-of-the-art winery finally completed, and the first wines ready for sale (only at restaurants and the winery's retail boutique for now, alas), the veil of

secrecy is being lifted. Stratus is the creation of David Feldberg, better known as the president and chief executive officer of Teknion, the successful office-furniture design company based in Toronto.

Dedicated exclusively to super-premium wines, most ranging from \$32 to \$55, Stratus is already drawing comparisons to the boutique cult wineries of Napa Valley.

What's most unusual about Stratus, at least from a Niagara point of view, is its dedication to non-traditional blends. Whereas most Canadian wineries focus on producing single-grape "varietal" wines such as chardonnay and pinot noir, or French-inspired blends such as the cabernet-merlot recipe of Bordeaux, Stratus is specializing in so-called proprietary blends containing a veritable mine-stone of odd bedfellows.

For example, the two vintages of Stratus White released this week each contain varying proportions of sauvignon blanc, sémillon, chardonnay, viognier, riesling and gewürztraminer. The Stratus Red 2002 contains not only cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc and merlot (the three main grapes of Bordeaux) but also syrah (typical of the Rhône Valley) and gamay (the rarely blended grape of Beaujolais). When the newly planted malbec and petit verdot vineyards are ready, those grapes, too, will be added to the red blend.

A secondary line of under-\$20 wines designed specifically for restaurants, playfully named Wildass Red and Wildass White, will contain a similar pastiche of grapes.

Traditionalists might balk at the unconventional blends, but they can hardly argue with the method – or the early and very promising results.

Peter Gamble, the former executive director of the Vintners Quality Alliance, Ontario's wine-standards body, and a consultant to the project since the beginning, committed the winery to a planting and pruning regimen that empha-

sizes a skimpy fruit yield of less than three tonnes an acre, producing fewer but more concentrated grapes.

The winery also is equipped with the latest equipment, such as a two-stage sorting table, which enables up to 16 people to first weed out under-ripe or damaged bunches and then, once the loose grapes roll out of the de-stemming machine, pick out the best berries.

Once the juice is pressed it is moved up and down in tanks on industrial elevators to avoid the



## Pick of the week

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need for pumping through tubes, which many winemakers believe produces off flavours.

"We take the stairs, the grapes take the elevators," says Jean-Laurent Groux, a French-trained winemaker hired away last March from Niagara's big Hillebrand winery, where he distinguished himself

with a luxury wine called Trius Grand Red.

Even though the vineyards are located in Niagara Lakeshore, one of the warmest appellations on the peninsula, expensive Napa-style wind machines have been installed in the fields to circulate warm currents, extending the growing season by up to two weeks in the fall.

I should add that not all the Stratus wines will be blends. Once the final recipes for the flagship Red and White are worked out each year, the leftover juice that's too good to go into Wildass will be bottled as single-varietal wines, such as chardonnay or merlot. Some will cost as much as or more than the Red and White.

I was the first critic to taste Stratus's wines two weeks ago, and I was impressed. **Stratus White 2002** (\$36) is an aromatic gem, billowing sexy scents of lychee, pineapple and smoke.

On the palate, it is full-bodied, fleshy and round, with hints of mineral and toasty oak lifting the tropical fruit, finishing with vibrant acidity. It reminded me of the California cult white Caymus Conundrum, only the Stratus is completely dry and, to my mind, more elegant.

**Stratus White 2000** (\$40) shows mango, honey and smoke on the nose – and echoed on the creamy, beautifully structured, and still very fresh, palate. The finish is amazingly long, with a kick of lemony acidity at the end.

**Stratus Red 2002** (\$38) contains significant amounts of gamay and cabernet franc and is bright and fruity, offering up black currant and cherry and a crisp finish.

I especially liked the **Stratus Merlot 2002** (\$55), which Groux had decanted two days earlier to subdue its formidable tannins. It still tasted remarkably fresh, with hints of blackberry and cedar on a chewy, concentrated base. For more information, call 905-468-1806 or visit [www.stratuswines.com](http://www.stratuswines.com)

