

Wineries reveal hidden gems

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I spent Easter weekend in Niagara exploring several top-notch Ontario wineries, hunting down the latest hidden treasures on tap from our winemakers.

My impromptu tour came on the heels of judging more than 150 wines in blind tastings at Crush Wine Bar over two previous Saturdays for the upcoming Ontario Wine Awards.

The latest crop certainly contains some gems, especially in the super premium sweepstakes. So I thought I'd share my most exciting discoveries. Bear in mind most of these are only available from the wineries for now.

Certainly the most superb Ontario wine so far this year is the **2004 Stratus White** (\$44, rating 92/100). Winemaker J.-L. Groux has assembled an exotic blend of chardonnay, gewürztraminer, sauvignon blanc, semillon, and riesling grapes into a lushly floral mélange with accents of peach, spicy apple, nectarine and apricot. This is Canada's version of Conundrum, a multi-blend California white with a cult following. It's being sold on a futures basis for \$38 but on release at the winery in May will retail for \$44. I tasted it at Treadwell's Restaurant in Port Dalhousie and was wowed by it.

The equivalent, **2004 Stratus Red** (\$44, 90), is an assemblage of cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, gamay, syrah, malbec and petit verdot, dominated by mellow black cherry, red licorice and vanilla notes. It, too, is the best version to date from this stellar winery in Niagara.

Fielding Estate Winery also is showing great dexterity with its whites. The **2006 Sauvignon Blanc** (\$20, 89) has a classic grassy aroma but on the palate, ripe peach and sweetened grapefruit flavours transform it into a mellow sipper. This winery's aromatic **2006 Gewürztraminer** (\$16, 90) is outstanding, brimful of peaches, spiced apple and pineapple elements with a whiff of rose petals on the finish. This gewurz won the Best Ontario White Wine Limited Edition award at Cuvée, and placed highly in the upcoming Ontario Wine Awards. The winery has 100 cases.

Winemaker Natalie Reynolds, now on maternity leave, has sculpted a terrific white in her **Thirty Bench 2005 Steel Post Riesling** (\$28, 90) with elegant tangerine, candied lime and wet slate aromas and candied quince and tangerine peel flavour. The finish is gently sweet and the wine shows great balance of acidity and natural sugars. Fewer than 10 cases are left of this gem. Their regular **Thirty Bench Riesling** (\$18, 88) took Best White at the Cuvée Awards.

The most potent reds from one winery? The Reif Estate "First Growth" series, each priced at a hefty \$50 a bottle. The **2002 First Growth Pinot Noir** (\$50, 90) is so rich it goes beyond normal pinot noir finesse. It powers through with blackberry, mocha, and black cherry lushness. The **2002 First Growth Merlot** (\$50, 91) blew away other merlots in our Ontario Wine Awards judging, with lavish black cherry, cedar, mocha, moroccan leather and violets notes, a very opulent red. Klaus Reif says only 200 cases were made of each.

Another big red is **Coyote's Run 2005 Meritage** (\$24, 90) a cabernet-merlot blend with lush black cherry, vanilla and raspberry aromas and measured richness, with very velvet smooth textures. There's still some left at the winery in St. David's.

I dropped by Lailey Vineyards as well, where Derek Barnett has been making solid value wines and experimenting with the use of 30 Canadian oak barrels for some time now. The **Lailey 2006 Riesling** (\$13.95, 89) is a winner, with anjou pear, lime, tangerine and peach freshness, coming out May 1. Especially intriguing is his **2005 Canadian Oak Pinot Noir** (\$34.95, 90) with chocolate, licorice and wild strawberry elements, but only 23 cases were produced (one barrel) in the tough 2005 year.

However, if you are looking for red patio sippers, the **Lailey 2005 Zweigelt** (\$11.95, 88) is, in my opinion, the best zweigelt produced in North America. This easygoing red shows bing cherry, plums and violets notes and should be served slightly chilled, like a rosé, to beat the heat of summer.

And chardonnay? From one of the lesser known wineries, **Mountain Road Wine Company 2003 Reserve Chardonnay** (\$25.95, 91, for release in July) shows lush buttery apple, lime and minerals complexity from accomplished winemaker Steve Kocsis, who also makes a killer **2002 Reserve Cabernet** (\$29.95, 91) full of sandalwood, pencil shavings, minty black cherry and black pepper power.

In affordable whites that are available, the **Hillebrand Estate 2005 Riesling Dry** (\$13.95, 89) rose above a field of rieslings, with lively lemon grass, candied kumquat and clementines zestiness. This is widely available on shelves now. For the other wines reviewed here, contact the wineries online if you want to get in on the big time action before local restaurants gobble up the supplies.

Some of the most avant-garde wineries are coming to Toronto on April 30 at MaRS Discovery District to showcase their wines in a tasting event called "Somewhereness 2007." Flat Rock Cellars, Malivoire, Norman Hardie Winery, Stratus and Tawse will present an evening of terroir. Tickets are \$65 a person. For more information, go to somerwhereness.com.

Ontario's **Ice House 2005 Vidal Icewine** has outperformed thousands of wines in Monde Selection in Brussels, garnering a rare and coveted Grand Gold. "We are thrilled," winemaker Jamie Macfarlane told me. Ice House Winery in Niagara, founded in 2005 as an icewine specialist, has no retail licence yet and is not open to the public. Vintages has purchased 60 cases of the golden nectar for release June 23 at \$54.95 a half-bottle.

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