

Discovering Ontario's cool new wineries and must-have labels

The Grape Ones

BY MARGARET SWAINE

Ontario's winery scene has blossomed with a number of cool, new wineries opening up shop the past few years. These are wineries with attitude, coaxing the best wines possible from their soils and cellars. Low-yield vines, gravity-fed processing systems and talented winemakers are just a few tricks of their trade. Restaurants in the know have added Tawse, Stratus and Fielding to their wine lists already.

ALL BOTTLED UP Luscious wines are ready for purchase at Stratus Vineyards where wine is moved by gravity rather than pumps, which can bruise fragile grapes and introduce unpleasant flavours.



STRATUS VINEYARDS

Established in 2000, and dedicated to producing ultra-premium VQA wines in limited quantities, Stratus officially opened its doors in 2005 to much acclaim. Winemaker J-L Groux (*pictured right*) focuses on blending different grape varieties to achieve wine that's complex and expressive of its origins. Its 61-acre estate in Niagara-on-the-Lake is composed of 45 blocks (for example, there are six blocks of Cabernet Sauvignon) to allow for Groux's philosophy of 'diversity for complexity.' "Our objective is to get out of the box," says Groux, who has planted 18 different *vitis Vinifera* varieties. The reds are Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Syrah, Gamay, Malbec, Merlot, Mourvèdre, Sangiovese, Tempranillo, Tannat and Petit Verdot. The whites are Chardonnay, Viognier, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Sémillon, Marsanne and Gewürztraminer.

Stratus coddles its grapes like precious children. Wine is moved by gravity rather than pumps, which can bruise fragile grapes and introduce unpleasant flavours. Wine which reaches the bottom is moved back up by elevator tanks. The mezzanine level, above the tanks and barrels on the main floor, is used to receive the grapes, destem and sort them. And what a sorting they get. There are 15 different ways to receive the grapes, including sorting bunches only, sorting berries only, or double sorting both bunches and berries.

The grapes, which are hand-picked at Stratus and brought in individual 40-pound baskets to the winery, usually arrive in much better condition than at most wineries. To double-sort they are put on a vibrating sorting table, passing by eight hand sorters per table who pick out the malformed bunches. These are recycled in the vineyards as compost. Next, the berries are separated from their stems by a destemmer. The berries fall onto a second sorting table where another eight-person team picks out grapes with signs of rot, under ripeness or other problems. It takes about 25 workers to process one ton of grapes an hour.

Preserving the environment is also a goal at Stratus, which achieved LEED Canada (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification in time for its June 2005 opening. The first building in Canada and the first winery worldwide to meet this standard, in order to qualify it implemented features to minimize any negative impact on the environment. For example, geothermal technology is used to heat and cool the winery, recycled materials were used in the construction, it





FIELD OF GREENS A family business, Fielding Estate Winery produces standout vintages and sells in some of Toronto's finest restaurants.

has a toxin-free waste management program, a herbicide-free vineyard and organic landscape based on indigenous plants. "Eighty per cent of the heating and cooling in the winery is free," Groux says of its 22,000-square-foot open-concept building. (The gas bill is under \$40 a month.)

Stratus produces several single varietal wines, as well as a late harvest and an icewine, but it's best known for two blends. Stratus White 2002 (licensee price \$32.42), a blend of six varieties that spends two years on the lees in wood barrels, delivers the five key elements Groux demands in his wines: intensity,

longevity, complexity, mouth-feel and long aftertaste. This is a complex food wine with bright acidity. Stratus Red 2002 (\$34.22), a blend of seven varieties, has a lovely elegance and balance in a medium body with good intensity, complexity and a lingering finish. Available only to licensees are the more approachable and affordable Wildass wines (\$15.31), the "second label" for Stratus. (Vintages and grapes not good enough for super-premium wines are made into Wildass.)

Current production in the winery is 7,000 cases, with a capacity to go up to about 10,000 using grapes from its surrounding property. The list of restaurants which serve Stratus is impressive, including Scaramouche, Auberge du Pommier, Canoe and Jamie Kennedy in Toronto, Beckta and Domus in Ottawa, The Old Prune in Stratford, Ont., Buffalo Mountain Lodge and Maple Leaf in Banff, Alta., CinCin and Vij's in Vancouver, the Saint James in Montreal, Hearth in New York and Tony de Luca in Niagara.

FIELDING ESTATE WINERY

Ken and Marg Fielding spent 25 years in the fast-food industry before following their dream to open a winery. (Ken was a master franchisor for Subway.) Very much a family business, Ken and Marg conceived and founded Fielding Estate Winery, their son Curtis is general manager, and his wife Heidi is the hospitality manager. Curtis used to race high-performance cars on the professional stock car circuit, before spending several years working at Vineland Estate.

Located at the top of a hill near Beamsville, Fielding has 13 acres of vineyards at the winery site and another 42 acres nearer the Niagara Lakeshore, of which 20 are currently planted with vines.

There are 14 varieties of grapes. Reds are Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, Baco Noir and Syrah. Whites are Riesling, Pinot Gris, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Chardonnay Musque, Vidal, Gewürztraminer and Viognier. The herbicide-free vineyards have vines aged from five to 16 years old. One of the keys to the vibrancy of its wines is low-cropping levels of about 2.5 tons per acres. Winemaker Andrzej Lipinski started them off well. Its 2002 Cabernet Merlot Reserve won gold at the 2005 All Canadian Wine Championships and gold at the Ottawa Wine & Food Show that year. The Riesling Semi-Dry and the Chardonnay Musque both won golds at the 2005 Ontario Wine Awards. Lipinski has moved on but winemaker Ray Cornell, who took over in the spring of 2006, plans to maintain the winning formula. A pioneer in Ontario, Cornell began his wine career in 1980 at Brights and most recently was winemaker at Harvest Estate and Hernder. His wines have won many accolades including the first ever gold awarded to a Canadian in international competition for his 1980 Willowbank Late Harvest Riesling.

Fielding produces 20 different wines, including the following highly recommended standouts. Fielding Cabernet Sauvignon 2004 (\$27.45) is a full-bodied blast of ripeness and fruit that's been barrel aged in French oak for 14 months. Rich, jammy, smoky with cigar box and herb nuances, it's a distinctive yummy powerhouse. Fielding Meritage Reserve 2004 (\$34.31) is a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Cabernet Franc. It has a bright fresh elegance on the palate, well-integrated oak and herbal sour cherry intensity in a medium body. Fielding Gewurztraminer 2005 (\$13.72) has a vibrant rose petal and lychee bouquet which carries through in the taste. Off-dry, it's rounded on the palate with a dry finish. Merlot Reserve 2004 (\$30.02) has an aromatic, spicy raspberry and earthy oak character in a plump body.

The winery started with just 550 cases in its first year of production, but will produce 10,000 by the end of 2006. Fielding sells to about 50 licensees as far north as Thunder Bay in Ontario. Diners can look for it in Toronto restaurants such as Jamie Kennedy, Mildred Pierce, Nectar, Sassafras and Harbour 60.



PERCHED HILLSIDE The picturesque Tawse Winery produces just five artisanal wines: Cabernet Franc, Pinot Noir, Estate Riesling and two Chardonnays — all excellent.

They can also be found at Aqua Terra in Kingston, Ont., Hidden Valley in Huntsville, Ont., Domus in Ottawa and Zest in Niagara.

TAWSE WINERY

Tawse opened its doors in the spring of 2005 on the lower slopes of the Vineland Double Bench. Taking advantage of the hillside terrain, the winery features a six-level gravity-fed processing system. Coils in the pond in the front of the building feed geothermal energy to the building to heat and cool it. Tawse owns 80 acres of vineyards, 70 of which are in current production.

Winemaker Deborah Paskus first made her mark with Temkin-Paskus wines. These iconoclastic wines, which she began producing with writer Stephen Temkin in 1991 in tiny amounts, were the groundbreakers that proved extreme pruning, low yields and special attention in the vineyards could produce superb wines in Ontario.

RESTAURANTS IN THE KNOW HAVE ADDED TAWSE, STRATUS AND FIELDING TO THEIR WINE LISTS ALREADY

When Moray Tawse, vice-president at Toronto mortgage lender First National Financial, bought vineyards in 2000 in Vineland, Paskus soon joined him. The first vintage made at the Tawse winery was the 2002, and the winery officially opened in May 2005. Grape varieties are first and foremost Chardonnay. The alternative white is Riesling, also grown on Tawse estate. The reds are Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc with grapes bought from organic grower Heather Laundry. Tawse vineyards have been herbicide and insecticide free since 1993, as well as fungicide free since 2000. Yield is cropped back to 1.5 to two tons an acre.

“Less is more,” says Paskus about her philosophy of wine-making. “All the focus is in the vineyard,” she adds. And that’s a lot, with the vineyard site, the vine selection, density of plantings, leaf plucking and much more to consider. “There is no recipe. The seasons are so variable you have to rethink all the time,” she says. A portion of the Tawse Chardonnay vines are 30 years old, which allows great complexities and depth to develop in the grapes.

Tawse produces just five wines, Cabernet Franc, Pinot Noir, Estate Riesling and two Chardonnays. All are excellent, especially Robyn’s Block Estate Chardonnay 2003 (\$38.81) and

Tawse Lincoln Lakeshore Pinot Noir 2003 (\$22.64). The former from the lower slopes of the Vineland Double Bench is hand-picked, hand-sorted and whole clustered-pressed. Unfiltered with lots of oak, it’s creamy, dense with ripe pineapple and spiced oak tastes with some granny smith apple overtones. The Pinot Noir grown closer to the moderating effects of Lake Ontario is plump, rounded, intense and velvety smooth. Its classic earthy, funky barnyard pinot character may not appeal to all, but lovers of this style will go wild for it. Also delicious is Carly’s Block Estate Riesling 2004 (\$17.78), a late harvest style white with tons of minerals, bergamot, tea and dried tropical fruits in its taste.

Production at present is 1,800 cases, and it’s geared to max at 5,000 cases. Last year’s reds were all sold out by October 2005, and just a few hundred or so bottles of the Chardonnay 2002 are left. Tawse can be found on lists at Didier, Scaramouche, Perigee, The Spoke Club, Ultra Super Club and other Toronto spots. In Niagara sales include Charles Inn, Treadwell, The Stone Grill and Queen’s Landing, in Ottawa Ambiente and Domus, in London Blue Ginger and in Quebec several new hot spots. □