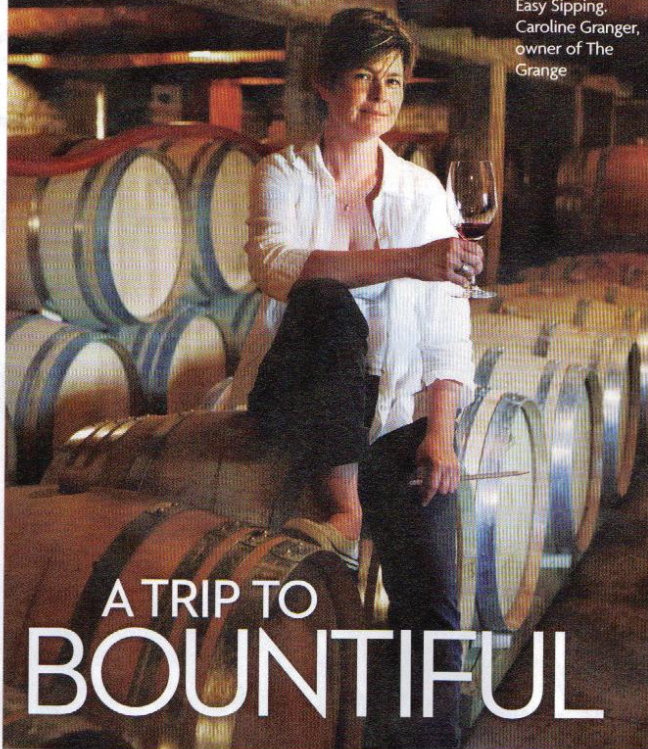


ONTARIO WINERIES

Easy Sipping,
Caroline Granger,
owner of The
Grange



A TRIP TO BOUNTIFUL

PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY IS GIVING OTHER WINE REGIONS
A RUN FOR THEIR MONEY **BY MARGARET SWAINE**

The lure of Prince Edward County is like the siren's song, irresistible to chefs, farmers, winemakers and other foodie artisans but fraught with difficulties for the people it entices to make their living here. However, none of this is apparent to the tourists who flock to this bucolic region, which juts into Lake Ontario south of Belleville and boasts grand sandbanks and quaint towns never far from water views.

This is a great place for a weekend cruise, with 24 (and growing) wineries, lovely inns, restaurants focused on locally sourced organic foods and pampering spas side by side with vineyards, fruit orchards and vegetable farms. Its fertile appeal goes back to the Empire Loyalists, who settled the area more than 200 years ago and were well into farming by the early 1800s. Hillier even had a winery in the 1870s. Life here, however, is not for the faint of spirit. The soil is more rock than earth, and vines must be buried, or "hilled up," every fall to survive the bitter winters.

The challenges have only encouraged the hearty and ardent lot that make wine in "the County," as they call it. As Ontario's newest Designated Viticultural Area, it's the youngest officially recognized wine-grape growing region in the province. County Cider, poised atop a limestone shingle ridge, was the region's only winery in 2000 (albeit making apple-based wines). Today, the cider company also makes some grape wines and remains a fine spot for lunch, with picnic tables overlooking Lake Ontario. Down the road, the picturesque Waupoos Estates winery, which opened in 2001, made the County's first grape wine — others soon followed.

Over dinner at Clara's fine dining at the Claramount Inn in Picton, I had the privi-

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL ORENSTEIN

lege of talking to several of the brightest lights in County winemaking. Plates of Lake Ontario pickerel (caught by Mr. Harrison and sons), Hagerman's golden beets, Flintshire Farms guinea hen, Neil Spike's fava beans, Century Game Park bison and Windatt Farms cherries graced the table.

Caroline Granger owns The Grange, — at 60 acres, the largest single estate winery in the County and the largest producer of PEC grapes. While she grew up on a farm here, she spent 10 years under the shining lights of Paris as a top model and actress. "I always played the au pair or the nanny. I was very cute back then," said Granger, who still has enviable fine bones, flair and charisma. Now, her talk is of grapes, expenditures and hard work. "I personally hand-sorted these grapes with five of my friends," she said of her cabernet franc.

A mother, she sees her legacy in the winery. "You plant a vineyard and you intend for it to continue beyond your death. Your sense of it is as an entity." While many in the County have to ship in grapes to augment what they can grow, The Grange finally became 100 per cent

locally grown in 2009. She's now working on building up an 18-month inventory of wine to ensure that product remains available in those years when the weather comes down like a sword on the vineyards, cutting production and yields to unsustainable levels. "So we can survive a complete crop failure, I spend a lot of time trying not to sell out," says Granger.

Few wineries in the County can grow enough to make all their wine from locally grown grapes and survive financially. Even an ultra-talented winemaker and passionate County grower like Dan Sullivan of Rosehall Run, who started planting grapes in 2001, relies on grapes brought in from Niagara for his more commercial wines. With wild hair and

the face of a born comic, his conversation is mesmerizing. He's determined to put the stamp of the area's soils and climate on his wines. "It's the notion of placeness, not out of necessity anymore but the desire to make something identifiable. Our cabernet franc doesn't taste like Niagara, and neither does our pinot noir. There's a brightness of fruit that we are able to produce. A real vivacity in the flavour profile," he says.

"I smell and taste earthiness," responded Granger. "It's a minerally smell — like when you are digging up beets, there's that sweet earthy aroma. I know that's Prince Edward County." All the winemakers at the table start piping up at this point about minerality, giving analogies and groping for the right descriptors. "Haven't you ever put a cup in a rocky stream and tasted it?" asks Sullivan. "First, you'll feel it, just before the finish. Almost like a slight raspiness on the back of the tongue and the sides of the mouth. That's minerality to me."

The special minerality of stony soil on limestone bedrock is fodder for winemaker debate, but they all agree it's there in the wines. They also agree on the challenges of the climate. Frederic Picard, Huff Estates winemaker, a dashing Frenchman who first made wine in Burgundy, says, "I'm very happy with my job, but it's also a challenge. There are always difficulties. We're trying to build something here on very marginal agricultural land. I call the County 'the laboratory.'" Picard says he has an amazing boss who lets him do what he wants in the winery, such as experimenting with the County's first champagne-method sparkler and planting experimental varieties. He's also the only one in the County to grow merlot, getting a fairly light-bodied red with firm minerality and cherry cedar notes. ▶



Sullivan prefers to focus on chardonnay and pinot noir, though he does make a delightful cabernet franc and other varieties. "Riesling does express minerality really quickly. I actually prefer Niagara riesling to our stuff," he adds. Granger also makes a range of varietals, matching her cabernet franc, for example, to the deepest soils. However, she says she's betting the farm on pinot noir.

What wines should you buy if you want to experience true County character? Here are some of my recommendations, all from County-grown grapes.

Don't miss the Huff Estates South Bay

Chardonnay 2007 (\$29.95) is masterful — rich, ripe butterscotch nose, plush in the mouth with tangy crisp backbone of acidity and true minerality. The Rosehall Vineyard Pinot Noir 2007 (\$37.95) has an earthy, mineral, beetroot nose with silky tannins and supple, gentle elegance. "I like my protein on the plate and not in the glass," remarks Sullivan when asked about the gentle elegant tannins in his reds. The Cold Creek Cabernet Franc 2007 (\$29.95) is intense, but with a velvet glove, those smooth, savoury tannins and lots of finesse.

The Rosehall Run vines are also used

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Vineyards Rosé 2008 (\$16.95) a blend of principally cabernet franc with cabernet sauvignon and a touch of merlot. Perfumed and full of wild berry, rhubarb and pink grapefruit flavours, it's medium-full bodied, tangy and dry. Also notable is the zesty, crisp, floral Huff Estates Pinot Gris 2008 (\$19.95).

Waupoos Estates Vidal Icewine 2008 (\$46.95) has a rich, tangy apricot jam flavour that makes it a great dessert wine. Black Prince Winery makes a rounded apple-crisp elegant chardonnay 2008 (\$14.95) with nice minerality. Sandbanks Estate Dunes Vidal-Riesling 2008 (\$12.95) is flying off the general list shelves. It's zippy, barely off-dry with peachy passion fruit flavours.

The Grange of Prince Edward Diana Block Pinot Noir 2007 (\$35) is medium-full-bodied yet taut with integrated oak and that rich, earthy beetroot mineral character Caroline Granger likes to encourage. Trumpour's Mill Gamay Noir 2007 (\$14.75 — it's the Grange's less expensive label) is different but impressive; quite dense with pomegranate and grapefruit flavours and a funky edge. Also with a nice ripeness is Trumpour's Mill Cabernet Franc 2007 (\$17.95), while the Grange Northfield Block Cabernet Franc 2007 (\$35) is smooth and velvety, full of savoury ripe flavours.

Rosehall Run's Rosehall Vineyard

for Jamie Kennedy's two new wines. Sullivan made the wine, but Kennedy tasted every barrel — 57 of them in the case of the pinot noir — to choose the four that would go under his label. Jamie Kennedy Pinot Noir 2007 (\$34.95) is a bigger, meatier style than Rosehall's with spiced savouriness. Jamie Kennedy Chardonnay 2007 (\$34.95), also a four-barrel pick, is aromatic with nice fruit, creamy texture and a medium body. (Four barrels means that just 100 cases of each wine has been made.)

Among the other relatively well-established wineries Norman Hardie County Pinot Noir 2008 (\$35) has clean vitality, supple tannins and a smoky cherry taste, and Closson makes a lush chardonnay. Coming on stream this year are Kienthe which just opened this September, Fieldstone Estate owned by Toronto writer Dick Singer and a number of others. All are optimists lured by the spell of this countryside, digging in the dirt for the glory of wine — the only gold in the limestone hills of the County. ■

Margaret Swaine has travelled the globe many times over as a journalist, wine critic and feature writer. She is the wine columnist for the National Post, a position she took after more than two decades as wine and drink columnist for Toronto Life and Chatelaine magazines. She balances the drinking with spas and golf.