

OntarioWineReview

A bi-weekly newsletter dedicated to helping you discover Ontario's best Wines and Wineries. Enjoyment comes from understanding - Passion comes from understanding more.



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OntarioWineReview: *Holiday Issue ... The Pinot Noir Challenge*

I'm sure you have heard a lot about Pinot Noir in the past couple of years; especially since the movie *Sideways* gave it a kick up our collective wine-radar. In fact, it was just last year that the phenomenon was in high gear. California was reported to be running out of Pinot because everybody and his dog was snapping it up left right and center; even the most casual of wine drinkers was apt to try some. The spill over from that movie was felt in all wine regions of the world – and Canada was no exception; although I don't think our supply was ever in danger. Suddenly, people who weren't Pinot drinkers were trying this thin-skinned grape's offerings. I have to admit that I am not an avid fan of Pinot Noir, and while I have had some nice ones over the years, I have never enjoyed them enough to become a major advocate. However, over the past year I have tried many more Pinots, from all corners of the world, and have come to enjoy Pinot with all its subtleties.

Now that most of the hype has died down and we are approaching high Pinot Noir consumption season - the holidays – I thought it was only fitting to check out some of the Pinots of Ontario and see if we could hold our own with this temperamental grape. It would seem these days that every winemaker in Ontario is trying his or her hand at Pinot or maybe it's that the bottles are more front and center on the shelves ... either way Pinot is showing a resurgence and there is no better time than now to take a more in-depth look.

What sparked this Pinot-madness in me. At the height of *Sideways*-mania I asked a man much older, and wiser in the wine world, than I, what was the real allure or Pinot Noir.

"Pinot Noir is a 'love affair' wine," (that means it is usually found on a person's list of "*the best wines I have ever tasted*" and usually in the top 3). "Good Pinot is like sex in a glass," he said. "You'll remember where you were, what you were doing, who you were with, and everything about it." I, for one, have yet to have that earth-shattering, knock-your-socks-off experience with a Pinot, and although I keep trying, my socks have remained firmly on my feet. Here at OntarioWineReview we decided to make that sacrifice for you, testing Pinot after Pinot in search of Ontario's best values. In the end, we narrowed it down to 6 readily available VQA Pinot Noirs, to see if we could get our socks to wiggle, even a little bit. This is an overview of our findings ... a full review of each wine can be found on the website.

The Criteria: We picked the wines based on a visit to the winery and a quick initial taste test. If the wine passed muster, we took it back to the panel for a more thorough tasting analysis. Only those specially selected for taste and value-for-dollar were brought back to "the lab". All six Pinots were from Niagara-area wineries, all had to have a price tag of under \$20.00, and all had to be available in sufficient quantity to be purchased readily. Of course, this is not to say that there aren't some great Pinots being made in the over \$20 range ... special mention should go to Southbrook, whose Pinot is very good but tops out at \$24.95, and Lakeview Cellars reserve Pinot also at \$24.95 which initially wowed the panel during the tasting, then the price was revealed. When all was said and done, we wanted to find some value priced Pinot so that you could augment your holiday table with a few bottles of the ultimate turkey wine.

The Wines: Birchwood 2002 Pinot Noir (\$11.95); Chateau des Charmes 2001 Estate Bottled Pinot Noir (\$17.95); Fielding Estate 2004 Pinot Noir (\$20.00); Lakeview Cellars 2002 'Butler's Grant' Pinot Noir (\$14.95); Ridgepoint Wines 2002 Pinot Noir (\$14.95); Stoney Ridge 2004 Bench Pinot Noir (\$12.95);

Our Findings: Similar characteristics were strawberries, raspberries and earth notes ... on nose as well as palate. Colour was also very light in 5 of the six wines tried. We found the Chateau des Charmes to be very robust and fuller than the rest (also much deeper in colour), with the best potential for long-term ageing. We also discovered the Stoney Ridge 2004 Bench to be quite light and refreshing, a fabulous Pinot for those just starting out with Pinot, or even those that might dislike Pinot ... this one is a good place to start to get a feel and taste for it. Suffice it to say, each wine had it's own specific qualities to offer over and above the similarities mentioned previously. Birchwood showed signs of sour cherry, while Lakeview showed more woody tastes including a pronounced cedar note. Ridgepoint was laced with blackberry, both on the nose and on the taste, while Fielding hinted at sweet red pepper. All were ultimately delicious and would be a welcome addition to your holiday meal this year – and some, like the Chateau des Charmes, Lakeview's and the Ridgepoint, for a few years to come.

As for the mind-blowing experience I was promised, it looks like we're still waiting for that ... but I'm not ready to give up yet.

Panel Rating:

1. Stoney Ridge (Best Value)
2. Chateau Des Charmes (Most Age Worthy)
3. Ridgepoint Wines (Most Surprising Taste)
4. Fielding Estates & Lakeview Cellars (Tie - delicious)
5. Birchwood Estate (Table ready)



Grape Guy's Pick of the Bunch : *Calling All Icewine Fans*

Visit the winery or their website for more details or to purchase these great wines.

Usually in these pages we stress value: value whites, value reds and other tasty wines under \$20 that you can enjoy every day without breaking the bank ... but let's say you have a few extra bucks burning a hole in your pocket, or Aunt Sara has just won the lottery and is giving her favourite niece/nephew (you) half. Here's something you can spend that money on: two interesting icewines - one for *now* from Peller one for *later* from Southbrook:

Peller Esates 2004 Cabernet Franc Ice Wine – \$80.00

www.peller.com

There are two reasons to celebrate here: ice wine fans will rejoice because this one is absolutely spectacular. Cab Franc fans will rejoice because Peller has done your grape justice with this succulent beauty. Sweet and smooth, not syrupy at all, great balance between nose and taste ... and ... are you ready for this - it tastes like chocolate covered cherries (in liquid form)! Chill and enjoy - forget pairing this with anything, drink it on its own NOW.

Southbrook 2003 Vidal Ice Wine - \$79.95

www.southbrook.com

Here's an absolute stunner that you should let sit on your rack and let it age a bit. Southbrook has produced an ice wine that has been aged in, appropriately, Canadian Oak. Honeyed nose and great lingering finish. Currently the wine drinks well with excellent balance, but it tastes a tad too sweet. This aspect of the wine will soften and mellow over time due to the oak ageing. Limited quantities makes this a perfect candidate for that special occasion a few years down the road such as a graduation or wedding ... so save this one for LATER.

Both wines are limited editions and available only at the winery or on-line.



The Grape Vine : *Submit your opinion and become a part of the OWR tasters circle.*

Should either of these wines be a candidate for our OntarioWineReview Crystal Cork Awards? Chime In!

Contact us at michael@ontariowinereview.com



Savory Sounds : *Music to set the mood ...*

Jamie Cullum "*Catching Tales*"

For any of you who heard Jamie's big label debut "TwentySomething" you could feel through the speakers that this guy had talent. Well on his second full-length effort he proves that the first was no fluke. This is one catchy album. From the funky opening song "Get Your Way" his pseudo-whining lilt fits the song to a tee; while the mellower "London Skies" evokes London in the winter: cold, desolate yet full of life to those who live there. Though he does not stray far from the formula that has suited him well on his past albums – this one just sounds more mature – as if his few years of stardom has hastened his growing up. Mixing standards such as "I only have eyes for you", "I'm glad there's you", and "Our day will come" with originals like the happy break-up song "Nothing I Do" (happy beat, sad lyrics – Cullum equates it with *Mack the Knife* ... upbeat song about an unpleasant topic) and the highly reminiscent "Photograph" helps to make this album a great listen from start to finish. There's plenty of cross-over appeal Jamie slides easily from jazz and pop standards to easy-listening songs with a funky-groove. This would have been a great summer album, but will definitely help brighten up those gray autumn and winter days.

An album this fun and appealing deserves something light and frothy – crack open something sparkling or even a sweet Riesling and enjoy. Check the website for my recommendations: a 2004 Hillebrand Vineyard Select Riesling, or for something a little more mature, the Willow Springs 2003 Riesling.



Wine Event Spotlight : *Speaking of Icewine*

Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the Icewine King – Ontario. Niagara celebrates the 11th Annual IceWine Festival January 13-22, 2006. This festival centers around the king of wine (at least in Ontario), icewine ... our crown jewel. Two icewine bars (actually made out of ice) locate themselves in Jordan and Niagara-on-the-Lake and find tasters enjoying icewine from all over the Niagara region. Also, there's a touring passport you can get for \$25 which will allow you to visit the various wineries and sample their luscious icewine paired with a matching delicacy – so be sure to bring your sweet-tooth. For more information go to www.niagarawinefestival.com



Contact Michael Pinkus Grape Guy

OntarioWineReview's Newsletter is designed to enhance the appreciation of wine, in particular Ontario's wines and wineries and to develop a better understanding about how best to enjoy both.

Please feel free to pass this newsletter on to other wine lovers!

To contact us with feedback, article ideas, comments, concerns or questions – email michael@ontariowinereview.com We look forward to hearing from you!

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