

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.



OntarioWineReview Newsletter – 53
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OntarioWineReview: *WINERY REVIEW – Thirty Bench Wine Makers*

Our winery reviews are done blindly – the wineries have no prior knowledge of our visit and are not made aware until just before we leave their premises that they have been “spot-checked” – this ensures that we get the same level of service that anybody walking off the street would get.

All's quiet on the Thirty Bench front – and why not, it's the day before Christmas and few creatures are stirring out in wine country, except me, checking in to see what all the hype is about.

Almost two years ago (May 2005), Thirty Bench was bought by Andre's Wines (now known as Andrew Peller Wines) and was brought out of the stone age and into the steel age (more on that in the wow factor). Those who have been to Thirty Bench in the past, will remember that rustic looking label, the haphazard over-crowded gift shop and the cheesy looking tasting bar with the big variety-store milk-fridge behind it. Well forget all that you know, or think you know! Peller has given Thirty Bench a much needed and stunning new look; I barely recognized the place when I walked through the door, in fact, I had to step outside to see if I was in the right place. Thankfully, from the outside, it looks the same, it's the inside where you'll notice, and appreciate, the changes. The tasting bar has been given a radical facelift: it's now an open concept area with places for tasting in front and, in back, for more private tastings. There's also a contemporary and trendy looking gift shop, located in the old entrance alcove.

Walk in the “new” entrance and you're immediately in the wine store, some wooden crates are stacked carefully on the floor to display whichever wine is being highlighted; while pristine new shelving racks line the walls with their bottles facing upward along the top for easy perusal ... and from the look of things, Thirty Bench has been doing some brisk business this Christmas season with many of their limited production wines already sold out. Peller has turned Thirty B. into the epitome of a boutique winery, making limited production specialty wines: such as small lot Rieslings, Gewurztraminer, Pinot Noir and a Rose Pinot Meunier. The wine store itself has become an open concept, highlighted by the wine bar in the middle of the large room. Behind the main wine bar, is another room - well lit by the natural light pouring in through floor to ceiling windows which encase the room. This room's view of the vineyards and the lake beyond finally showcases the beautiful view that has been hidden from most for many years. The room offers a stunning place to relax, while you sit, sip and savour wine. Encircling the room, are approximately 9 tables for two (or three if you squeeze in), where “private” tastings are held. Upon your arrival, there are a few wines offered for complimentary tasting at the main bar; if you want to wrap your lips and tongue around a flight of Rieslings, or any of the other limited production wines Thirty Bench offers, it will cost you and it's held in the more private tasting environment. You are invited into the back room. There you'll receive the royal treatment to taste and discuss the wines, an intimate yet brighter and more open setting ... made even more appealing by the beautiful backdrop of the vineyard and the view beyond. The light streaming in on this beautiful “winter” day gave this backroom encounter a warm, friendly feeling ... the wine guide Alex, was also knowledgeable and led a most enjoyable conversation and tasting.

Alex took us on a tasting tour of the small lot Rieslings (of which a few are now sold out or have been bought up by Vintages for an April release), a Pinot Noir, and Niagara's first single varietal version of a Pinot Meunier, made from 15-year-old vines. Pino Meunier is usually used as a blending grape in sparkling wine, but this time, it's been made into a dry rose. Not much of this grape is grown in Ontario, so relish in the fact that you are tasting something unique and original for Ontario (read the review in the Picks of the Bunch selection).

Alex has been with Peller for the past five years and came over to Thirty Bench after hip replacement surgery at

the beginning of the year. He's affable and friendly and best of all, doesn't seem to mind working on Christmas Eve Day, "it's only 'til 3 or 4," he says, "and I like being here." A former manager of a local Canadian Tire, until the wine bug bit him, really speaks to how the wine industry attracts and lures all kinds into its seductive web. Before leaving the winery, I was given a quick tour of the production facility. Nine large oak fermenters lie dormant in the back, and in a thrilled tone Alex describes how "they can be filled to whatever level we need depending on the quantity of juice we have extracted." Of course now all the wines are resting in barrel, comfortably soaking in their surroundings, and the fermenters sit empty.

Thirty Bench's boutique status is enhanced by the limited amounts of wine and specialty wines that are on their shelves. Aside from the 164 cases of Pinot Meunier Rose, it would seem that Thirty Bench is trying to corner the market on Ontario "bench" Riesling ... they currently have 4 in their portfolio, three of which were produced in lots of under 250 cases. Each is distinctive in taste and smell, all delicious in their own right ... and some completely sold out.

Sometimes I am not sure that becoming more "trendy", opening the winery up to a more modern look, or falling into a niche works for a winery, but Thirty Bench needed a facelift and this one really works for them. They have lost their country-bumpkin-guy-in-a-garage-making-wine feel ... now it just feels right in a (and you've heard me use these words throughout this review) warmer and friendlier kind of way. Peller and Thirty Bench have accomplished something admirable and have really captured a good feeling amongst all the glass and steel. They have taken advantage of the view from the back room and opened the store and tasting room up – bringing it into the 21st century while still keeping the boutique aspect of the winery. Even the label has been given a modern makeover. I hope when you get there and see the vast improvements on the inside you'll agree. As for the "steel age" I mentioned earlier, check out the wow factor.



Grape Guy's Picks of the Bunch: A Rarity and a Riesling

For directions and more information visit www.thirtybench.com

Thirty Bench 2005 Bench Riesling - \$17.95

Thirty Bench has become one of those wineries that has cut down their product line and have started specializing in certain grape varieties ... like Riesling. On their current wine list they had 4 ... 3 are vineyard specific and are produced small quantity, and then there is this one – which is a blend from all three vineyards and their entry-level value priced version at \$18.00 (as opposed to the 28 and 32 dollar vineyard specific versions). This is a great place to start experiencing Thirty Bench's brand of Riesling. A nose of lime and apple with the slightest hint of petrol ... the minimalistic petrol follows through on the palate and so do those great citrus expressions ... crisp, clean acidity makes this a wonderful sipper with or without food.

Thirty Bench 2005 Rose Pinot Meunier - \$22.00

1.5 acres of Pinot Meunier are grown at Thirty Bench (heck I think maybe 1.5 acres of Pinot Meunier are grown in Ontario), but the one five combination does not stop there. The grapes have been growing in the "back part of the vineyard" for about 15 years. For those not familiar with Pinot Meunier, it is the third grape used in Champagne, and a grape variety rarely mentioned because it is blended in such a small quantity ... what's more it's one grape that is rarely, if ever, seen on it's own, especially as a still table wine ... and specifically as a rose. For those expecting sweet in their pink, move on, this one has been born and bred fairly dry, with cranberry, raspberry and strawberry on the nose. The taste is tart and tangy, drier than the fruity nose indicates, with a lingering finish of rhubarb. Delightfully refreshing when served chilled.

These wines are available at the winery only.



Weekly Wine Notes and More

The Grape Guy presents "Weekly Wine Notes"! A savoury selection of Ontario wines to impress, enjoy, or just plain drink! A NEW Wine Selection is added to the Wine Review Section every Tuesday!

Here are this week's Weekly Wine Notes – which are posted on the website every Tuesday:

[Chateau des Charmes 2005 Gamay Noir \(White Label\)](#) and [20 Bees 2005 Riesling](#)

There are also some additional articles in the [On the Road with the Grape Guy](#) section:

Reports on my [Cuvee 2007 En-Route Tour](#) and my taste through this year's [Wine and Cheese Show in Toronto](#)



The Wow Factor:

Every winery has a uniqueness to it ... be it the tasting bar, the barrel cellar, the gift shop ... something besides just the wine – it is here where we highlight another reason you should visit.

There were a lot of wows for me at Thirty Bench, particularly the new open concept look and the natural light cascading in through the floor to ceiling private tasting-room windows. The gift shop area no longer takes up three-quarters of the store and now boasts elegant black shelving and a classy look. However, what really stood out, was the little bit of country-throwback they were able to maintain amongst the trendy/modern new look and feel. All the wine notes were riveted to these old rusted eight inch square tin roof pieces, as if they had been pulled off the old farm house out back and recycled for this purpose. Even the signage above the wood and arborite tasting bar was done in rusted tin (bigger pieces mind you) with "No. 30" spray-painted on using a stencil, playful and almost as an afterthought ("what do we do with this big piece?" – "Just spray something on it."). Totally cool, totally retro, totally unique ... see if you can actually walk through the place without touching one – like Lay's chips betcha can't touch just one.



Wine Event Spotlight: Herb and Wine Festival – May Weekends

Throughout the month of May, Niagara-on-the-Lake hosts the Wine and Herb Festival, a great taste sensation for those who like to find different pairings for their food and wine. Throughout the month of May the 17+ wineries of Niagara-on-the-Lake pair up their wine with a specific herb inspired/infused nibbly ... and it is a tasty little trip through the area. Passports are \$30 and give you the opportunity to taste your way through all the wineries. Check the website www.wineandherbfestival.com for details of what these pairings are to be and other events happening around the area all month long.

Passport Giveaway: Looks like we are giving away passports to the Wine and Herb Festival ... I have just received word that we have 2 pairs of passports to giveaway to this savoury event. Send your name, address (with postal code) and phone number to me (michael@ontariowinereview.com) - please put "White Belt" in the subject line (you WKRP fans will understand. Just a quick public service announcement: that landmark show hits DVD for the first time on April 24). *This time round I am asking a skill-testing question: Name one Niagara-on-the-Lake winery?*

Recent Winners: We have our winners for the Hamilton Food and Drink Fest (www.foodanddrinkfest.com) and they are John Kijonek (Grimsby) and Evelyn Truty (Hamilton). Congratulations and enjoy the show.

OntarioWineReview's bi-weekly newsletter is devoted to the love, enjoyment and promotion of the wines of Ontario and the wineries that make them.



Psst, Pass It On ... keep the good wine flowing. Forward this newsletter to your mom in Milton, your son in Smith Falls, any other family member or loved one that you know needs good wine advice.

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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