

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 – 60
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OntarioWineReview: *What's going on in Niagara?*

In a recent discussion with a member of the Ontario Wine Society, we found ourselves chatting about the new wineries opening up in the Niagara region. The member lamented, "it seems, with the exception of Calamus, that the newcomers are high end and expensive." This was said to me on the heels of opening day at Niagara's newest winery, Hidden Bench (June 2) where policies for visiting and tasting were set out thusly: "due to the size of the tasting room we do not do groups of more than 8 persons ... require an appointment for groups larger than 4 ... tastings are \$10.00 for our flight of four estate wines." Prices for wines started at \$18 (for a rosé); \$22 (for Riesling); \$30 (Chardonnay) and \$40 (white meritage).

What my OWS friend is referring to are the Tawses, the Hidden Benches, the Strati, the Ice House, the Alventoes, and the soon to be, new Southbrook that all seem to be a opening up with wine prices that seem to be priced out of this world; a world that's more California-centric then Niagara-based. In a recent interview I read in the North York Mirror, Brian Kroeker, of the Niagara Grape and Wine Festival, was quoted as saying (jokingly I think), "we're Napa-North, or as we like to say Canapa." It would seem that some are taking this to heart.

To date, the best values for VQA-Ontario wines have been at the wineries - and the excitement about the region has been getting out there and finding those finds. But now a day in Niagara wine country is not just about the gas, the time, and the money for a case or two of your favourites ... it's about the tasting fees that will be levied, purchase or not, and as a writer about, and consumer of, Ontario wines, this concerns me.

Talking with an employee of Tawse Winery, a few weeks back, I began to see the light about tasting room fees. "We don't make a lot of wine," he said, "to pour a bottle becomes expensive if you don't sell a bottle or two with each pour. People come in, see our prices and all they want to do is drink." In that case, yes, I agree, charge them for the tasting ... if all they do is come in, taste and walk, then yes a winery should have the right to charge; just like in any business, the bottom line depends on customers purchasing their product. I also noticed a sign in a winery not too long ago stating that the winery was taking part in the "Responsible Winery Program"; it went on to explain the program and the reason for the tasting levy: "many people are using the wineries as a roving happy hour and to deter that practice a 'nominal fee' will be charged for tastings." I am in full agreement with that too. As a serious wine drinker who tastes, not for the buzz (usually), but to find a bottle of interest, to buy and/or to recommend, the 'happy hour tasting fee' makes perfect sense. But give employees the common sense and leniency to judge the difference. When a customer comes in, tastes a few and purchases some bottles, don't chase them out into the parking lot for their tasting fee – that just leaves a bad taste in their mouth (so to speak) and will make them leery about returning. When you spend \$100+ on wine, you should not be hunted down for the extra two-bucks.

But it's not just about the tasting fee (I am starting to see the light about that – though the exorbitant prices charged for tasting fees - \$10 for four 1oz samples seems a little extreme); it's about the wine prices. I have long been a proponent of a two-tier wine selling approach: The under \$20.00 and the over \$20.00. The average price most people will pay for an every day drinker is \$20.00 (actually between \$12 and \$20) ... a winery should have a decent to good quality wine within that price range; if you successfully develop a following in that price category, when it comes time to buy that "special bottle" your winery is the one that customers will remember - not the place whose prices begin at \$32.00 and have a cover charge of \$12 to walk in the door. As an example of way-out there pricing let's look at a new winery in Niagara called Alvento, which has just recently

released their price list on their website. They have three wines starting at \$32.80, for an '04 Meritage red blend; \$39.80, for an '05 red blend; and \$49.80, for a Viognier (white). It's as if new winery owners want to make back their investment right away, instead of being in it for the long haul, building up clientele and goodwill along the way. My same OWS friend remarked that many of the new owners are hobbyists, not wine people – meaning they made their money (or continue to make their money) elsewhere and not primarily from the winery. So here's a little advice for those just starting out: raise your prices over time, show us (the buying public) what you can do; develop “low-end” and “high-end” wines of quality ... don't storm the gates-of-high-prices and think everyone will come crashing through just because you're the newest thing in town. As the old saying goes: “you only get one chance to make a first impression” – what will your impression be? People won't return if they perceive you're too pricey from the get go – and it'll take much more work to get them back through your door once you've lost them.

Back to my OWS friend again who cites Fielding as a prime example of doing it right: “they have a good mix in their portfolio,” he wrote to me, “they have inexpensive and premium tastings. Something for everyone looking for a winery experience. Too bad the newer wineries aren't following this model.” Too bad indeed.

Something to take note of ... I am in no way back-peddling here, but I like to think kudos should be given when they are warranted, as well as a slap on the wrist, as the situation dictates. I have done some bashing of a certain winery in my day for their price policies, wine choices, and retail decision ... but never let it be said that I do not praise when praise is deemed worthy. Tawse winery is starting to come around with their price points. Sure the winery still has wines priced in the upper-stratosphere, but some of their newest wines have been reasonably priced for the average consumer. Rieslings below \$20, Chardonnay Musque in the same range and now they are following it up with a line of Bistro wines (sold in restaurants and available at the LCBO thru Vintages come the fall) called “Echos” – because the winemaking method parallels, or echoes, their usual ways of making wine. It has something to do with the selection of barrels after ageing and nothing to do with the grapes that go into them. These wines will retail for \$22 - \$25, and all considered are very good value (see review below). Good for Tawse for realizing the hole in their portfolio – now will those you've alienated return, and will Tawse produce a red under \$20? Time will tell.



Grape Guy's Picks of the Bunch: Reds - to hold or for the Q

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

Tawse Winery 2005 Echos Bistro Red - \$25

www.tawsewinery.ca

You might have read a little something about this wine in my report on [Somewhereness](#), which Tawse attended and participated in ... but let's recap: Echos is named that way because the wine “echoes” their top-tier wine – same vineyards, same attention to detail, same hand harvesting and sorting, same low yield, same barrel ageing – just when it came time to select the “best” barrels these didn't make the cut ... or better yet, the others were a cut above. Whatever way you say it, this is still one amazing wine. It's a 70/30 blend of Cab Franc and Merlot and is Tawse's first attempt at bringing their wines into the “everyday bottle” price-category; and while the price is still a little up there, they do make a valiant attempt at making their wines more accessible to the masses. In that context, I say with this wine, they succeed admirably. The nose will be many things to many people because here we have blackberries, red licorice, cherries, cranberries and some light cinnamon aromas ... The taste follows right along with much of the same, including the cranberries, cherries, red licorice and mainly red fruit flavours with the added bonus of vanilla-cola. Definitely some yumminess here. The finish is long lasting with hints of that 14-month oak ageing on the tongue. As for where to get this wine, forget the winery, this is a restaurant or LCBO only purchase. Subtitled “Bistro Red”, you'll find this in fine restaurants or in Vintages come this fall – so be sure to not only keep your eyes open for it, but pick up a few bottles when you do see it. As an aside, the aging potential for this one is also very good – say 7-plus years easy.

Hillebrand Winery 2005 Trius Red - \$19.95

www.hillebrand.com

This is the very first solo effort of the Hillebrand flagship Trius Red that winemaker Darryl Brooker has shepherded from start to finish – and another fine addition to the Trius catalogue of great wines. Trius is traditionally the name given to Hillebrand's Bordeaux-blend reserve wines made famous by former winemaker J.L. Groux; under Darryl's care it's no different. 14 months in primarily French oak barrels (55% of it new); this 47% Sauv, 43% Franc and 10% Merlot is a wonderful wine from the hot, but short-cropped 2005 vintage – and Brooker has put his heart and soul, (and almost all of 2005's best barrels) into the blend. This will be the only Trius this year because of the shortfall (there will be no Trius Grand Red and only a limited release of Trius

Franc around mid-summer). In the mouth, you'll find the wine to be smooth and lush, even at this young point in its life, the wood has really integrated well with the fruit and fine tannins. The nose shows the promise of this wine with white pepper and other spices, along with cinnamon, allspice, vanilla, plum and a great big bushel of red fruit. Already three months in bottle, the wine is still a little tight on the palate and requires some decanting or an early opening before serving. Currently, it shows signs of red fruit, oak and sweet spices with a rather lengthy finish. Over time this wine will open up on its own, and will deliver the goods right from the bottle. A good food wine that would pair well with summer's end, or early fall, BBQs. As for longevity, Darryl is conservative in his estimates, "I'm comfortable saying between 5-7 years," he told me ... push him and he'll concede to maybe 10 ... and I'm comfortable with that.

Read the review of the inaugural [Trius 2006 White](#) blend

The Tawse wine will be available thru Vintages in the fall.
The Hillebrand wine is available at the winery and LCBO.

Summer Selection:

Every newsletter throughout the summer, I will recommend a great summer-sipper to make the most of your patio, cottage or boat – click on the link below to read this week's pick:

[Legends Estates Winery 2006 Semillon - \\$16.95](#)
available from the winery only



Weekly Wine Notes and More

The Grape Guy presents the "Weekly Wine Note"! A savoury selection of Ontario wines to impress, enjoy, or just plain drink! A NEW Wine Selection is added to <http://ontariowinereviews.blogspot.com> every Tuesday or listen to the Podcast at www.ontariowinereview.libsyn.com.

Here are the [Weekly Wine Notes](#) that were added to the Blog over the past two weeks:

Strewn Winery 2006 Cabernet Rosé ([read](#)) ([listen](#))
Fielding Estate Winery 2006 Sparkling Riesling ([read](#)) ([listen](#))

The July 7th LCBO Vintages Release report is available here:

<http://grapeguyvintages.blogspot.com/2007/06/saturday-july-7-2007-vintages-release.html>



Quick Sips: *Occasionally interesting things cross my desk that I would like to pass on*

For July 2007

The rumours you have heard are true, Dan Aykroyd is jumping into the wine business with both feet. The Dan Aykroyd Winery will begin construction in the fall of 2007 and is scheduled for completion by harvest 2008. And yes, it does seem that Birchwood Winery will be no more, as the new Dan Aykroyd Winery will take its place. The plan calls for an environmentally friendly winery with solar panels and green friendly wastewater management; the winery will also show off memorabilia from Aykroyd's 30-year career. The winery's focus will be on Bordeaux-style wines along with Chardonnay and icewine starting in the mid-price range (\$15+). I guess we will soon be seeing wines hitting the Canadian marketplace with names like Conehead Red, Blues Brothers Blend, Wild & Crazy Festrunk Franc and my personal favourite "Jane You Ignorant Slut" Blush-Rosé. See my reviews of Dan's inaugural wines here: [2006 Chardonnay](#) – [2005 Cabernet/Merlot](#).

Much good is happening in the County these days: First Prince Edward County has now graduated to become a recognized DVA (Designated Viticultural Area) in Ontario, with all the rights and privileges that go along with it. And second, the Artevino Awards were handed out. These awards focus exclusively on the wines of Prince Edward County, and were passed out in May. Some of the big winners include Rosehall Run, who took top score for a county white, [2005 Chardonnay RRV](#), and Huff Estates, who took top honours for a red, [2005 South-Bay Cabernet-Merlot](#). The winner of the Jonathan Welsh Award, which is awarded to the winery with the best medal to entry ratio, was Huff Estates. To read about more award winning wines from this year's competition, check out the following reviews: [Sandbanks 2006 Riesling](#) (Gold); Huff Estates 2005 Gamay (Bronze – see [Wine and Cheese Report](#) under Home Grown Heroes); [Rosehall Run 2005 Cabernet Franc "Cold Creek"](#) (Silver); and [The Grange 2005 Cabernet-Merlot](#) (Silver).

Other Awards handed out throughout the province ... The All Canadian Wine Championships winners were

announced May 18 in Windsor ... these awards are passed out around this time every year and showcase the diversity of Canadian winemaking from coast-to-coast. Each major wine region (Ontario, B.C., Quebec, Atlantic Provinces) picked up at least one award. Ontario picked up best white wine of the year for the [Angels Gate 2006 Sussreserve Riesling](#); and we picked up the bulk of the medals in the following categories: Chardonnay, unoaked (4 of 6); Chardonnay, over \$20 (4/7); Riesling, under \$15 (5/7); Sauvignon Blanc (5/8); Vidal (2/3); Cabernet Sauvignon, under \$20 (2/3); Meritage Blends, under \$20 (7/9); Baco Noir (3/3); Select Late Harvest Wines (2/3); Vidal Icewines (8/9); Soft Fruit Off-Dry (3/3); Soft Fruit Dessert (4/5); and Tree Fruit Off-Dry (2/3).

Finally, from the "Everybody is Giving out Awards" file, the Elsie Awards were handed out June 13 in Toronto. What are the Elsie's? They are the LCBO's awards to honour those who help us get our alcoholic fix, or in the words of Rafite Louli, co-chair of the Elsie's, "[to] recognize suppliers and agents who excelled at marketing their products and worked with the LCBO to help consumers discover the world of beverage alcohol." Winners included Churchill Cellars as Agent of the Year; Andrew Peller Limited for Best New Product Launch (a tetrapak no less, yikes) – wine category; the VQA Excellence Award went to Niagara Vintners Inc. (aka: 20 Bees) and Kittling Ridge for Environmental Commitment.



Wine Event Spotlight: Fielding Estates 2nd Annual "FEW-esta Tomato" – Sunday August 26, 2007

Heirloom tomato-lovers and wine enthusiasts alike will be treated to an afternoon of wine tasting, lunch and live entertainment. On Sunday August 26 from 12 noon to 5:00pm, join the folks at Fielding for the 2nd Annual FEW-esta Tomato ... a virtual tomato extravaganza like no other. Taste premium Fielding wines along with over 50; yes that's 5-0, varieties of heirloom tomatoes. Take advantage of expertly led wine and food seminars, nibble on artisan cheese from Upper Canada Cheese Company, sample specialty vinegars by Essence of Niagara and so much more. Dom's Downtown will be preparing the lunch, which includes mouth-watering tomato dishes, barbecued meats and "sweet tomato treats". Finally, what's a party without some live music to go with it – this year Flat Broke will provide the live musical entertainment. Tickets are \$50 each, special discount for friends of FEW. More info can be found at www.fieldingwines.com or by calling 905-563-0068 – ask for Whitney.

Ticket Giveaway: And now here's your chance to attend "FEW-esta Tomato" – Fielding has been kind enough to put 4 tickets up for grabs to OntarioWineReview readers. So send an email to me at michael@ontariowinereview.com, don't forget to include your name, address (with postal code) and phone number – put "The FEW-esta, The Proud" in the subject line ... and also tell me what type of wine Fielding just released (hint: check the July 3 Weekly Wine Note). Entry Deadline: Wednesday July 11, 2007 – 11:59pm.

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 Mimico your uncle in Uxbridge, your great aunt in Grand Bend or 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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