

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 – 74
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Ontario Wine Review: *The Cabernet Franc Challenge ... part 1*

When it came to Ontario wine, my first love was fruit wine. It's true; my favorite winery all those years ago was Sunnybrook Farms. They made the most awesome wines: spiced apple, cherry, strawberry ... wines you didn't have to think about, their flavors were on the label, then they were in your mouth – no muss no fuss. But I got to thinking, 'what was so "Ontario" about fruit wine' (no offense to the fruit wine makers of this province); after all fruit wine is being made here there and everywhere fruit is grown. Wine grapes, however, require a specialized zone of the world (between 30 & 50 degrees latitude) and I live in a grape growing province - time to adjust my tastes and move away from the tree and over to the vine.

Next came anything sweet, Hillebrand's Select Late Harvest Vidal, my very first Ontario white wine love ... then I took a few steps down the sweetness ladder, which saw me enjoying Riesling in all its forms ... This is not surprising when you consider I grew up drinking (unbeknownst to me) semi-sweet German Riesling on any special occasion – Deinhard Green Label to be exact - a four on the sugar code.

Then one day a friend introduced me to the joys of red wine - from Chile no less ... smooth, supple Chilean Merlot - and I was hooked.

But I don't live in Chile, I live here in Ontario - what did we have to offer the wine world? This question can be asked in two ways, with the pessimistic "we" or the optimistic "we". It took a few more years of drinking, traveling and enjoying Ontario's great selection of wines, before I really latched on to something that seemed uniquely Ontario, (in the optimistic sense): Cabernet Franc. The LCBO shelves had plenty of bottles with their labels staring back at me, grapes like Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz, from all over the world ... but the one grape you didn't see much of was Cabernet Franc, until you hit the Ontario section. Hmm - this was something that required further investigation.

To my amazement, Cabernet Franc was prevalent all over Ontario – every winery made at least one, and in most cases, by George, it was a good wine. Why were there so few Francs on the world stage but so many here in Ontario? Simple: It grows well and we here in Ontario have a knack for making it good. With each passing year, our winemakers get more adept at making this grape variety into wines of world-class quality.

Cabernet Franc is traditionally a blending grape, it is one of the five main grapes in a Bordeaux blend - the other four are Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Malbec, and Petit Verdot. In France, where this blend took root, two of these five grapes have taken center stage. Merlot on the right bank of the Bordeaux region and Cab Sauv on the left ... leaving the lowly Franc as just a minor player. Sad really, especially if you consider the fact that the King of all red grapes, Cabernet Sauvignon, was actually sired by Cabernet Franc ... that's right, the son has usurped the father, but unlike Oedipus, Sauv didn't kill dear old dad, he just banished him to a lesser role.

Here in Ontario, we've rescued pop from complete obscurity – sure, he shows up in Meritage blends, but he also regularly appears quite prominently on his own, and that's how we like it.

This past November, OntarioWineReview assembled a whole bunch of Cabernet Francs (close to 70) and groups of tasters ... in the intimate surroundings of the [Fine Wine Reserve](#) in downtown Toronto. Over the course of six nights, we tasted our way through Cabernet Francs from four different categories (Regular, Blend,

Reserve and Ice). We asked three simple questions of our panels: Do you like it (taste)? Would you buy it (likelihood)? And is it good value (value)? These criteria made up the basis for our scoring system. Each panel was served the wines blind and the prices were not revealed until the first two questions had been answered. We had 32 regular francs, 11 blends, 18 reserves, and 7 ice / late harvests from 39 participating wineries that spanned the entire province. The regular wines were broken down into three nights, the reserves into two and the blends and icewine one each. Each night we had one winner. Here's how it all broke down:

Night 1 - Regular Cabernet Franc ... part one -

It was a rainy day ... just kidding. Night one saw a good turnout join us in the cozy confines of the [Fine Wine Reserve](#) where we poured our first twelve regular Cabernet Francs. We had at least one representative wine from all three of Ontario's recognized DVAs (Designated Viticultural Area – for the purpose of this article, Pelee Island is included in the Lake Erie North Shore area) and we even had an outsider - a new winery located outside a DVA region. Unfortunately, this also caused some controversy because their wine actually fell into the blend category, but was labeled as a straight Cabernet Franc. The wine from Oak Heights Winery in Warkworth (north of Colborne) would later be disqualified because of its 75 / 25 blend of Franc to Sauv. It should have been entered (by the winery) into the blends category, but because it was labeled as straight Cabernet Franc it was not. Later, when it was found to contain 25% Cab Sauv it had to be disqualified (according to VQA rules a straight varietal can have up to 15% of another grape in it without having to disclose its content on the label – this is a worldwide standard, except for California where it is 25%). Before being removed, it had been ranked second for the night, which is very impressive for a new winery, makes you wonder where it would have placed with the blends.

When all the dust had settled, it turned out that Niagara had dominated the evening with Willow Heights' (the new home of Wayne Gretzky's winery) 2004 Cabernet Franc (\$13.95) taking home top honors, followed closely by 20 Bees 2006 Cabernet Franc (\$12.95) and Hernder Estate (\$14.95). Taste honors went to Pillitteri's 2002 Cabernet Franc (\$18.00); but Willow Heights' value won out and they took both likelihood to buy (before price was revealed) and value (after price reveal) - giving them the top spot for the evening – seems Mr. Gretzky doesn't just know hockey, he also knows which winery to buy into.

Night 2 – Regular Cabernet Franc ... part two -

Our second night saw twelve more regular Francs being poured; nine from Niagara and three from the Lake Erie region. Once again, Niagara ruled this Franc class taking the top five spots before being stopped by a fruity, value priced Franc from Pelee Island. Night 2's winner was none other than Henry of Pelham with their 2005 Cabernet Franc (\$13.95) followed by Hillebrand's 2005 Trius Cabernet Franc (\$14.95) and Joseph's Estate Winery 2004 Cab Franc (\$16.95). This time the scores were a little more spread out among the 3 criteria. Taste went to Joseph's, likelihood to purchase went to Hillebrand, and value went to Henry. It was on value that Henry was powered to victory over the rest of the field – combined with their second place finish in the other two criteria categories (taste and likelihood). Interestingly, Henry of Pelham doesn't always make a straight Cabernet Franc, preferring instead to use the grape in their Meritage blends; but 2005 saw an exceptional Franc crop and they decided to treat us with a straight varietal wine ... our panel treated them to a victory for this good decision. Let's hope we see more Franc from Pelham; they have definitely proved they make it well.

Night 6 – Regular Cabernet Franc ... part three -

Due to the great response for Franc, we had too many regular Francs entered for tasting on the two nights, which we had originally planned – 32 wines in total. There was no way we could subject our panels to more than twelve wines per night (for fear of palate fatigue – and John Q. Law – namely the RIDE program at that time of year), so we had to holdover the extra eight wines for our icewine panel to judge. This turned out to be a real treat, and also proved to be our tightest race. Prices ranged from \$15.00 to \$35.00 a bottle. We had at least one wine from each DVA and we even had the only certified organic wine in Ontario at the table. When all was said and done, first place went to a Lake Erie North Shore winery called Colchester Ridge for their 2006 Cabernet Franc (\$14.95) - taking top honours in both the taste and value criteria. Second place went to Frog Pond Farm with their certified organic 2006 Cabernet Franc (\$16.00 – 500ml) and third was scooped up by 30 Bench's 2005 Small Lot Cabernet Franc (\$35.00). Frog Pond swept second place across the board, while 30 Bench's third place finish was mainly due to their high score in likelihood to purchase (first) but hampered by their price tag (value = 4th).

Regular Franc Nights wrap up ...

When all the scores had been tabulated and the numbers crunched, we had our ultimate winner of the three-night competition. Scores were so tight that I had to go to the second decimal point to get a winner, but finally,

and by a mere .02 Henry of Pelham's 2005 Cabernet Franc squeezed by the Willow Heights 2004 while Hillebrand's 2005 Trius was itself just off by a few decimal places in third. It was an impressive array of wines, the power and finesse of Cabernet Franc and what we can do with it here in Ontario.

A quick aside: Some of the wines poured were not yet ready to be consumed, needing a few more years to show their true potential ... these wines should have in fact been put into the reserve category but because the word reserve has such little meaning in the wine world some wineries refuse to use it on their label. Glassware also proved to be an issue for the average consumer, a problem I addressed in my previous newsletter ([Newsletter #73](#)); an issue I plan to address for the next challenge.

Despite the disqualifications and glassware issues, the people have had their say about regular Cab Franc – and the results speak for themselves. What about the blends, reserves and icewines? Stay tuned, as they will be revealed in the next newsletter on January 31.

You can see the [results of the Regular Cabernet Franc nights](#) on the website - broken down night by night - while the [final placing of all 32 Regular Francs can be seen via the downloadable PDF document](#).

	<p>The Fine Wine Reserve provides secure, climate-controlled cellaring space to store your fine wines. Store by the case (with pick-up & delivery), or rack up your bottles in your own private wine locker starting at \$36/mo. The only “purpose-built” professional cellar in the city, with private tasting lounge, downtown location and 24/7 access. Cellar tours are welcomed. To book your tour or for more information please call 416-593-9463 or visit www.FineWineReserve.com.</p>
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Grape Guy's Picks of the Bunch: *A couple of Reserve Francs we tasted*

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

Stoney Ridge 2005 Wismer Vineyard Reserve Cabernet Franc - \$36.95 (W, WTH)

www.stoneyridge.com

When I first tasted this wine, out of barrel at a sneak peak winemaker's dinner in January of 2007, I thought it was lovely ... so lovely in fact I got the particular's wrong – I wrote something about “Fox Vineyard” ... but my analysis of the wine still holds (A dark fruit nose and chocolate taste all wrapped up in a dark fruit blanket ... a sweet mid-palate, wonderfully smooth tannins and good acidity makes this a winner with a capital “W”. Finish that off with a medium-long finale and 14% alcohol and you have [a] ten plus year wine to enjoy for years to come). Today, just 12 months later, and bottled, this beauty still holds up to that review. But now it has developed a tad of vegetal smell on the nose, hidden mostly by the sweet tobacco and vanilla. In the mouth, it is the red fruit and silky tannins that carry the show. The vegetal blows off in about 15 minutes from initial opening (on both nose and taste) ... and this one becomes a delicately smooth and enjoyable - one to drink now and into 2017, though I am not sure my bottles will last that long.

Mastronardi Wines 2005 Cabernet Franc Reserve - \$17.00 (W)

www.mastronardiwines.com

When first opened, you get a whiff of this one and wonder, “what the heck am I drinking?” This one is loaded with lots of green vegetable matter on the nose ... thankfully, that blows off in about 20 minutes and reveals something more than drinkable. The nose is blackberries and tobacco leaf, invitingly so – while the palate has red fruit, vanilla, and a sweet cherry-tobacco-Old Port cigar like flavours – very pleasant. And of course those flavours carry through to the end with a sweetish finish. The length is short-lived, but that just means you have to dip back into the well for another sip sooner. Allow this one to breathe for about 30 minutes before drinking ... then sip away.

Taste it Again Grape Guy:

On occasion, I'll take a wine I like and put it away in a “special box” for a few years just to see how well it ages ... here are some of those wines:

[Chateau des Charmes 1999 Estate Cabernet-Merlot](#)
[Thirteenth Street Winery “Reds”](#)

Availability legend: W (Winery) – L (LCBO/Vintages) – WTH (Winery to Home)



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:

Bella Vigne 2006 Leon Millot / Foch ([read](#)) ([listen](#))

Willow Springs 2006 Testa Limited reserve Pinot Noir ([read](#)) ([listen](#))

[NEW Blog ... Lost and Found:](#)

Wines that got "lost" on my wine racks - some are Treasures others are Trash ... Find out what happened

The January 19th LCBO Vintages Release report is available here:

[Ontario "Vintages" Releases: Saturday January 19th, 2007 Vintages Release](#)

Also see the reviews of the notable Ontario Wines being featured in this Vintages release:

[Featherstone 2005 Cabernet Franc - \\$18.80](#)



Wine Event Spotlight: *Icewine Wine Tour – Saturday Jan. 26, 2008*

To coincide with the Icewine Festival happening down in Niagara, the iYellow Wine Club is hosting one of their iYellow Wine Tour to some of Niagara-on-the-Lake's premier icewine making wineries – and also of the Icewine Bar being erected in the heart of Niagara-on-the-Lake. This is a great way to take in the Icewine Festival and best of all you don't have to do the driving. Full details of this tour can be found at www.iyellowwineclub.com.

Quick Reminder – Don't forget about the [London Wine and Food Show](#) running January 18-20 at the Western Fair grounds in London Ontario ... the Grape Guy is speaking on the Saturday night (Jan. 19) at 7:30 – hope to see you there.

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



What can the Grape Guy do for you ... Michael Pinkus (Grape Guy) provides a variety of wine related services that you might be interested in taking advantage of: he gives lectures, leads seminars, conducts tastings, sets up tours; consults, selects and judges. He also gives interviews, broadcasts, podcasts and writes. [Contact the Grape Guy if you require any of these services or have any questions.](#)



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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