

## 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 – 79**  
**March 27, 2008**

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### OntarioWineReview: WINERY REVIEW – Daniel Lenko Estate Winery

*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.*

About six months ago, I received an e-mail from a newsletter subscriber that asked: "Have you done a review of Lenko? Have you tried his wines? I think he makes the best wines in Niagara." My answer was no, I have not reviewed his wines, and yes, - I have tried them ... in fact Lenko's wines are part of a very famous story my buddy Geoff and I tell about visiting Niagara in our university days – unfortunately, I can't repeat it here; but have no fear, the only thing hurt was our pride and ability to pay our tuition fees (thanks mom).

Just before Christmas (2007), my fellow wine writer Dean Tudor and I ventured from Toronto to visit Daniel Lenko Estate Winery. Dean does not visit the Niagara region all too often (maybe once a year) and he jumped at the chance for a road trip. Problem for my review purposes is that to visit Lenko at that time of year an appointment was necessary, so our visit was not a secret, therefore my disclaimer of anonymity at the top is null and void this time out. What we did learn on this day was candid and eye opening as we were led around the property by Daniel and his assistant winemaker Ilya (who has been with him since the 2002 vintage). Also a long for the tour was Blackie VI, Daniel's dog, who barked every time he saw us emerge from a building. Blackie is also "the great vintage detector". Daniel explained, "he doesn't usually eat the grapes, but he will during harvest time, though only in the good vintage years, especially Chardonnay." Blackie successfully predicted 2002, 2004, 2005 and 2007.

Lenko is a true micro winery, producing between 3000 and 5000 cases a year. Half of that number is in the production of Chardonnay (4 different kinds), while another quarter to a third is Merlot ... the rest is whatever grew well that season worthy of making a good quality wine. You see Lenko is a pure estate winery – meaning they only make wine from what they grow and do not source fruit from elsewhere; neither do they sell their fruit anymore (much to the chagrin of many a winemaker). It is because of this, that they are considered (or consider themselves) a premium winery -charging premium prices for what they make.

Daniel is a third generation grape grower and the 35 acres they own (30 on the winery property, another five by the QEW) have been planted with Chardonnay since 1959 - the youngest vines on the property are twenty years old, while the oldest are between 30 and 35. They also grow Viognier, Syrah, Riesling, Gewurztraminer, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Franc. You'll note that there is no Vidal on that list, and you'll almost swear that you've bought, or had, a bottle of his Select Late Harvest Vidal; or maybe you noticed a recent sign on the property proclaiming the sale of icewine (at "better prices than the LCBO"). While both cases are true, Lenko has decided to sell off his Late Harvest and Icewine inventory and never make the stuff again. "It stresses the vines too much," he reports to us ... he then goes into a diatribe about how the icewine bubble will soon burst and that Ontario has done nothing to shore up its market presence with any other kinds of wine to fall back on (with his second point I fully agree).

On Lenko's current list, there are sixteen different wines for purchase. He would like to scale that down to between nine and eleven, sticking with his core wines: Chardonnay and Merlot, and then make whatever grows well that year. Lenko stresses that the wines he makes, "are dictated by the year, not by the market,"

and what can be made well. "Quality level is more important to me than being able to make the same wines year-after-year - and it's something my customers will come to know and will get used to." Lenko also tells us he's gotten away from machine harvesting, choosing instead to go the route of handpicking and sorting, for better quality of fruit and increased control of brix (sugar) levels when picking. The barrel tastings of the '07 Chardonnay bare out what Lenko is preaching - the unoaked is full of tropical fruits and fresh citrus while the French oak fermented edition has a vanilla-butteryness with a touch of spice.

For the most part, Daniel Lenko sounds like an honest grape grower trying to make a living, but speak with him at length and out comes a brash-coarseness that shows a bitterness and cynicism with the Ontario wine industry. He goes on at length about the LCBO's treatment of small wineries; he seems bitter about a tax credit he is not entitled to, and then when he qualifies, he's ticked because he didn't get as much as a bigger winery up the road; and he's quite honest about his pricing almost to a fault: "We put "reserve" on the label because we can get more money for it." He says with respect to his Riesling Reserve.

There are plenty of reasons to visit Lenko good wines, honest conversation, and a sense of Ontario grape growing history that you can sip from the glass – afterall, Lenko does have some of the oldest vines in Ontario, but the most interesting reason just might be in the wow factor (see below) ...



**Grape Guy's Picks of the Bunch:** *What Lenko is known for – Chardonnay and Merlot*  
For directions and more information visit [www.daniellenko.com](http://www.daniellenko.com).

Daniel Lenko Estate 2005 Old Vine Merlot - \$49.95 (W, L)

Lenko's second LCBO-bound wine is also from the 2005 vintage (following the ['05 Meritage](#)). This one has quite a bit more fruit (at this time) than its Meritage counterpart. Although it spent eighteen months in French and American oak, the wood used was mostly preconditions (read: used) oak, thus keeping the fruit to oakiness ratio in better balance. The smells are distinctively black cherry, blackberry and cocoa, while in the mouth, there are ripe tannins that wrap up dark berries, cinnamon, vanilla and spicy characteristics; there's even a cocoa powder like finish. Another cellar candidate (five to seven years), but can be consumed right now with your favorite piece of red meat.

Daniel Lenko Estate 2004 Old Vine Chardonnay - \$22.95 (W)

Lenko makes a lot of Chardonnay: Unoaked, French oak, American oak, Signature -all at different price points and appeal-levels for the Chardonnay lover ... My favorite is this American oaked version - it just seems to have more complexity on the palate and I enjoyed its playfulness in my mouth. Starting with the nose, there was sweet vanilla inter-playing with apple, peach and a touch of caramel (vanilla and caramel, how can you go wrong?). The mouth showed buttery softness with more vanilla, white peach and some oxidized (browning) apple flavors - heavenly.

Here are three other Daniel Lenko wines I enjoyed:  
[2005 Meritage](#) (W, L), [2006 Viognier](#) (W), [2006 Reserve Riesling](#) (W),  
[2005 Signature Chardonnay](#) (W), [2006 Unoaked Chardonnay](#) (W)

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 every Tuesday and you can listen to the Podcast.*

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

Lakeview Cellars 2005 Reserve Syrah ([read](#)) ([listen](#))  
Thirty Bench Winemakers Family of 2006 Rieslings ([read](#)) ([listen](#))

**NEW Reports in the [On the Road with the Grape Guy](#) section:**

[CFRA Hostex Show 2008](#)  
[Graham Beck Luncheon](#)  
[Don Melchor Tasting](#)  
[California's Coming](#) and [Preview Tasting](#)

[What's NEW in the ... Lost and Found \(blog\)](#)

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

**Just Found:** [Pillitteri 2004 Riesling Dolce](#)  
[Magnotta 2002 Toro Nero Cabernet Sauvignon Limited Edition](#)

[What's NEW ... Taste it Again Grape Guy \(blog\)](#)

Taste it Again - find out what has happened to some of my favourites over the past few years

**Re-tasted:** [Featherstone 2004 Onyx Cabernet Merlot](#)  
[Mike Weir 2002 Cabernet-Merlot](#)

**Vintages Release:** [The March 29, 2008 LCBO Vintages Release report is now available.](#)

**Ontario Wines of Note at Vintages for March 29, 2008:**

[FrogPond Farm 2002 Cabernet-Merlot](#) – [Creekside 2006 Sauvignon Blanc Reserve](#)  
[Malivoire 2006 Pinot Gris](#) – [Black Prince 2006 Reserve Cabernet Franc](#)  
[Henry of Pelham 2006 Cabernet Franc Icewine](#)



**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.*

Daniel Lenko Estate Winery is a true micro winery, a garagiste as the French call it ... a winery that sells wine right out from the garage door behind which they are making the wine. To keep with that small venue, yet homey atmosphere, Daniel takes the tasting and selling out of his garage and moves it into his kitchen, literally. Wines are tasted at the kitchen table with the counter (as your backrest), fridge, stove and sink behind you - the only thing this kitchen has that yours at home lacks is a cash register.

Lenko closes his tasting room from Christmas to February every year, though his wines are still available by phone and online.



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

For March 2008

**“It’s not like you’ll get The Order of Canada or something”** ... Famous last words. When I first started writing about wine, my father’s ringing endorsement above filled my ears ... well congratulations go out to Tony Aspler, who proved dad wrong – you can get the Order of Canada for writing about wine.

**More proof that Bees are dying off** ... You’ve most likely heard of them and you’ve seen their distinctive bottles on LCBO shelves, but those days might now be a thing of the past. News broke the night of the Cuvee Awards Gala, Niagara Vintners, known as the 20 Bees, had gone into receivership. According to recent reports, many suitors from both inside and outside Canada are looking to snap up the winery and its state-of-the-art production facility.

**Miles would be appalled** ... It seems that Merlot may be making a comeback. A study released by Constellation Wines U.S. (parent company of Vincor), showed that 20% of wine purchasers dubbed “image seekers” (“consumers who use the internet to harvest factoids about wine and like to experiment with trendy wines and packaging”) take Merlot home as their wine of choice.

**The Inevitability of Death and Taxes** ... Sure we get taxed to death here in Canada, but if you live in the U.K. you’re watching your wine taxes go up and up and up. The U.K. government has approved a raise in wine taxes that makes theirs the highest in the E.U. – and these taxes are destined to rise even further over the next 4 years. It’s all part of a crack down on binge drinking, which critics say punish casual drinkers more than those into binging. Interesting to note, Spain, Portugal, Romania and Germany have no such levies on wine and Hong Kong just dropped their duties in the hopes of becoming a major wine-trading hub for eastern markets.

**3 Books, 2 DVDs, 1 CD and a case of Yellow Tail please** ... Soon you’ll be able to add a case of Mondavi to your Amazon.com cart. Reports say that Amazon is looking into adding wine purchases to its website. Almost certainly Amazon.ca will NOT follow suit ... surprise, surprise.

**It came to my desk and I poured myself a glass ...** Three international wines appeared at my door these past few weeks. The best of which was a sparkling wine from Chile that infuses Patagonian strawberries into its mix; you can actually see tiny bits of strawberry pulp in your glass. You've probably seen me mention Fresita (\$13.85 - #56697) in some of my On the Road with the Grape Guy pieces. I poured this in mixed company and someone remarked, "it's a hot tub wine" – luscious strawberry flavours delivered on a bubbly stream; absolutely delicious and perfect for patios, picnics and other occasions (or even non-occasions). Also across my threshold appeared two bottles from the Californian wine company Don Sebastiani & Sons, Smoking Loon Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon, both new at the LCBO. While I found the Chardonnay to be typical Cali-Chard, the Cab Sauv proved to be very pleasant and enjoyable. It went over very well when I served it to company, many thought it tasted well above it's \$17.75 price tag, one remarked, "I'm buying a case of this tomorrow, I know [my girlfriend] will love it."

**Ending on a Sad Note ...** Back in December, the Niagara wine world lost a true gem in Lionel Rancourt. I had visited the winery back in the Fall of 2006 ([Vignoble Rancourt Winery](#)) and found Lionel to be a true gentleman and innovator with a quick mind and wobbly step, due to a recent knee injury, which didn't slow him down one bit. His spirit and joie-de-vivre will surely be missed.



**Wine Event Spotlight:** *An F'ing Daba-Do Time ... April 12-13 & 19-20*

Tired of faraway fraudulently fantastical festivals? Well fear not Ferdinand, the fine fermenters at Fielding, Featherstone and Flat Rock invite you and any fair-weather friends you can find, to the frivolity of the "**F'ing Winery Tour**". For a fraction, two-fivers (five less than fifteen), these folks will tickle your fancy with featured samples (wine), phyllo treats and friendly confabs in the confines of their fiefdom – sounds like fun. Be forewarned, these festivities are not for the faint-of-heart, in fact, those fearful of fun should feel free to forego from following fellows to this potential flagrant social faux-pas, which may result in frozen fruit being flung at them for not feeling the fellowship. Fear not, there will be other chances more feasible and fashionable for you at a future fabrication. Here's hoping you have an F'ing good time if you go – the name of the game is FUN Falstaff. Find further facts at [www.fieldingwines.com](http://www.fieldingwines.com) and [www.featherstonewinery.ca](http://www.featherstonewinery.ca).

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**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](mailto:michael@ontariowinereview.com). We look forward to hearing from you!

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