

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 – 87
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News from OntarioWineReview ... *Three little news items to pass along*

The Vote Goes On ... The vote for the next OntarioWineReview grape challenge is on-going, currently Pinot Noir is leading the pack with 23.2% of the vote; next in line is the surprising Gewurztraminer grape with 17.1%. Voting closes August 6, 2008.

Buckhorn Bound ... For those looking for something to do this weekend Fiesta Buckhorn is a great place to spend the weekend or just the day. Plus, yours truly will be speaking on Saturday at 4:00pm.

Sparkling Article ... Find yourself a copy of the July/August edition of Tidings magazine, there's a fantastic article about Ontario sparkling wine.



OntarioWineReview: New Vintages Festival Makes a Come Back - *An open letter to the patrons and organizers:*

I have been accused, recently, of bad mouthing the Niagara Wine Festivals. They figured that by giving me a couple of passports to each festival (Icewine, Grape and Wine, New Vintages) they were automatically assured a positive review – but I always call them the ways I see them. After the last festival, I decided it was time to let you know what was happening and what I observed regarding the newly formatted passport program – which I have been rather critical of from day one on my blog ([On the Road with the Grape Guy](#)). However, I did not relegate my thoughts and findings to just my blog, I moved them out to the newsletter for all to see ([Newsletter #76](#)); the article dealt with a Festival in peril of losing its way, or more to the point, of having lost its way, for both its customers (wineries) and patrons (you and me).

Now, I didn't just come up with this on my own and I wasn't trying to make trouble for the festivals, but you wouldn't have believed it listening to Ken Weir, President – Niagara Grape & Wine Festival. He told me that I misrepresented the festival, was misinformed and gave wrong facts (the wrong fact he cited was my Henry of Pelham gaff – HOP has not been part of the festivals for some time, I included them as a drop out winery, and that was my error – I have since rectified it in the on-line article). In truth he did not like the negative publicity: me calling them out on the carpet (who can blame him?). This allegation came from the same guy who a few months earlier had praised my candor and wanted me to continue to be honest about the festival: "You will find that I like to hear the good & bad" he wrote in an email to me, "there are always a few things that need to be ironed out and your comments/observations allow us to do that."

It all came to a head during the Icewine Festival where I had a number of winery principals approach me, while I was just simply sampling their wares, and told me things like: "if things don't change we're pulling out"; "the wineries don't benefit, the festival is making all the money" and "we're not getting value for the time, money, effort and product we're putting in." Now, if only one winery's personnel approaches me and sings about sour

grapes that's one thing, but when a bunch do, that's a problem. I was also told that a meeting with the festival principals was pending and these problems/issues would be raised ... I am told by a few that the list was "quite long".

But it wasn't just the wineries. I also heard back from attendees who were also less than impressed with the value they received.

When I first started writing up the Festivals, their passport program format was: visit-as-many-wineries-as-possible in a weekend. Today the format is very different: passport holders can visit only a set number of wineries ... the old number was 5 – the new number, starting with the New Vintages festival, is now 6. The reason for the limit on number of wineries to visit was always explained to me as a liability issue – they didn't want drunken folks darting from winery to winery in a frenzy to hit as many as possible. The upping of the number to 6 signals an improvement and willingness on the part of the festival hierarchy to listen to their members, and the public, while still complying with their own liability issues.

I want to point out that during these festivals, there are plenty of other things to do, besides the Winery Experience Passport Program, but this is where I choose to focus my time and efforts ... afterall, the name of the website is OntarioWineReview, and the purpose is to promote Ontario wines, wineries and the love of this province's winemaking endeavours. It's definitely not about being a hack to get you to come here and enjoy a festival without merit; the only way to raise the level of these festivals and events is to let them, and you, the public, know the problems (cons), as well as the pros.

With all that said, I am happy to report that this year's "tweaks" to the New Vintages festival was a step in the right direction of fixing what was, in essence, falling apart. Kudos to all involved, those on the planning committee, and those who heeded the warnings of the disgruntled wineries (as many or as few as there were). The value offered at the wineries I visited was up in quality and seemed to be, mostly, on par with one another. I'm here to slap your wrist when you do things wrong, but I am also one to "shout out props to my peeps" when things are done right. I trust this is not the end of the fixes, but it truly was a better passport program, and I heard more positive feedback from the wineries this time out. To paraphrase a famous quote: "If you build it they will come," I would like to add, "if you build it better they will come back" ... those patrons/regulars who found themselves disenchanted by the festival's format, and vowed never to return (until things got better) should once again take the opportunity to enjoy the wineries of Niagara.

[To read my review of this year's winery passport tour and offerings click here.](#)



Grape Guy's Picks of the Bunch: *Cabernet-Merlot, Riesling, New Releases and the Must Pile*
See individual winery website for information.

Ridgepoint Wines 2005 Cabernet Merlot - \$15.25 (W)

www.ridgepointwines.com

Winemaker Arthur Harder is still plying his trade at Ridgepoint, and although he's most noted as a white wine maker, he also makes decent and consistently good reds. Take this '05 Cabernet Merlot for instance. The nose is full on juicy black cherry and blackberries and that juiciness follows through with more black cherry and a hint of woody tannin bite that leaves a little bit of dustiness behind on the tongue. This wine really is a gulpable beauty that I finished (with a little help – very little help actually) over the course of an hour or so ... I suggest you experiment with this yourself.

Magnotta 2006 Medium Dry Riesling Special Reserve - \$12.15 (W)

www.magnotta.com

This is another of those Rieslings being made in the Niagara region that's well priced and delivers great refreshment at the same time (see the Niagara College 2007 for another). This one's not going to blow you away with minerality and high acidity – which makes it perfect as a quencher for poolside enjoyment on a hot summer day. Apple is the most prominent smell on the nose, while apple/peach with a squeeze of lemon delivers your taste sensation from mid-palate all the way to the refreshingly long finish. Sugar code claims this is a 3, but there is no way you would have guessed that, because it finishes much drier.

Just Released::

The anticipation is over, Hillebrand finally releases the long awaited [2005 Trius Cabernet Franc](#) and sneaks into

market the [2007 Trius Merlot](#) ... both excellent values at \$14.95.

The Must Pile:

Every so often I end up with an over-abundance of good wine reviews that I feel I must pass on to you ... some might consider this a dumping ground, but I like to call it my "must pile":

[Birtch Farms Oak Aged Macintosh](#) (W) – [Colchester Ridge 2006 Chardonnay](#) (W)
[Erie Shore Vineyard 2005 Cabernet Reserve](#) (W) – [Lailey Vineyard 2006 Syrah](#) (W, WTH)
[Huff Estates 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon](#) (W, WTH) - [Riverview Cellars 2006 Riesling](#) (W)
[Reif Estate 2006 Chenin Blanc](#) (W, WTH) – [Riverview Cellars 2006 Gerwurztraminer](#) (W)
[Smith and Wilson Estate Wines 2006 Pinot Gris](#) (W)

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



Weekly Wine Notes and More: *Lost & Found - Taste it Again - On the Road*

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 or 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:

July 8, 2008 – Coyote's Run Red & Black Paw Cabernet Franc ([read](#)) ([listen](#))
July 15, 2008 – Southbrook Vineyard 2006 Whimsy Syrah - Lot 19 ([read](#)) ([listen](#))

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

[Jackson Triggs Twilight in the Vineyard starring 54-40](#)
[Nederberg Dinner](#)
[The Wine Writers Tour of Niagara](#)
[Huff Estates 6 Barrels for 6 Chefs](#)

[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
Check back next week

[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
Check back next week

Vintages Release: [Ontario "Vintages" Releases: Saturday July 19th, 2008 Vintages Release](#)

Ontario Wines of Note at Vintages for July 19, 2008:

[Cave Spring Cellars 2006 Estate Bottled Sauvignon Blanc](#) - [Flat Rock Cellars 2007 Riesling](#)
[Henry of Pelham 2007 Pinot Blanc](#) - [Chateau des Charmes Methode Tradition Brut](#)



In the Cellar ... with Frederic Picard of Huff Estates

"I like to experiment." Famous words by Madame Curie and now of Frederic Picard, winemaker of Huff Estates, who took a scant few of us in to his barrel cellar for a preview tasting of some of the 2007's he's working on. The comment was in respect to his Pinot Gris of which currently 3 versions exist: a lively, fruity, lemony tank version; a softer 3-year old barrel version; and a smoky-vanilla laden new-barrel version ... the new barrel version has such an incredibly long finish. "I'm not sure what will happen with the ones in barrel," Frederic says, "they may get blended into the tank, but I'd like to one day release a barreled Pinot Gris."

The experimentation doesn't stop with Pinot Gris. We moved on to the Southbay Chardonnay. Frederic wanted to show us the difference barrels can have on a wine. We tried the same fruit (Chardonnay), from the same vineyard (Southbay), using the same yeast, in the same type of barrel (same forest and producer in France) with the same degree of toasting (charring of the inside of the barrel) ... the only difference was the age and size of the barrel. The 2-year old 225L barrel had lemon drop and vanilla sweetness; the new 225L barrel tasted like dessert in a glass: caramel apple, buttered toffee, smooth vanilla sweetness with the fruit coming out on the finish – intense and lovely at the same time. Then we tasted from the 400L new barrel,

softer on the palate, very elegant, with vanilla nuances, more fruit, and lower acidity - very easy to drink.

Merlot was our next stop on the tour. Frederic was excited about the 2007 vintage, which he described as "perfect here in the County, not like the drought conditions they had in Niagara – we got just the right amount of everything." Many of the Merlots we tried from different barrels were still very much on the reductive side (smelling of sulphur or rotten eggs) – but Frederic insisted that was how Southbay Merlot starts out, and having worked with it for 4 years, he should know: "In September, after racking a few times [moving wine from one barrel to another] the smell goes away, leaving very clean fruit, you would not believe the difference." Frederic has a passion for Merlot and is bound and determined to make the best County Merlot. When asked why not Pinot, which seems to be everyone else's passion here, he admits that yes it does very well but, "There are great Pinots being made all around me here in the County, I do not see the need to duplicate; for me it's my Merlot – I will one day make a great Merlot from County fruit. It's just a matter of finding the right balance in the vineyard, if I have to go to one bunch per plant I will."

But Frederic hasn't washed his hands completely of Pinot. He and Huff sales manager Karen MacLaurin have purchased five barrels and a couple of rows of fruit from the Beamsville Bench area (Wismer Vineyard) of Niagara. Their first experiment was in 2006 with their first bottling of [Picard-MacLaurin Pinot Noir](#) (\$34.95 – released early-July 2008). But the real excitement is in barrel right now. Frederic is practically gleeful as he pulls the bung (plug on the barrel hole) and extracts the wine for us to taste ... "look at that colour and the concentration of fruit", and indeed the colour is not your usual cranberry-juice tone; it's much darker, more like something you'd find in a Merlot or Cabernet Sauvignon. The smell and taste is big black fruit, a hint of some red, loads of tannin and a touch earthy. It's made from relatively young fruit (4-5 years old) and rest in 2-3 year old barrels. "It's going to have to have to stay in barrel quite a while," Frederic says, "but the results..." he pauses to sniff the wine again and smiles like a kid with a secret.

Our final taste of the afternoon was the 2007 First Frost, a wine that has become the signature of Huff; a late harvest Vidal with a twist. Two-thirds of the vineyard is picked at the regular time (i.e.: September) and fermented bone dry; in January they pick the remaining third and add just the juice squeezed from these pseudo-raisins into the already made wine, giving it that hint of sweetness (around a three when all is said and done). Frederic admits to losing a little of the alcohol in the process (usually less than 1%), but he loves what he gains back in flavours and especially aromatics.

I should mention what Frederic said right at the beginning of our tour, especially for those who are thinking that this whole idea of starting up a vineyard and winery is a romantic notion they'd like to follow: "If I have one piece of advice, don't buy a vineyard [in the County] unless you like hard work – it's hard to grow grapes here." But the results are rewarding indeed, especially from the consumer point of view.



Uncorked and Decanted: *Nifty gadgets, accessories and other things that enhance wine enjoyment.*

Why I hate iTunes ...

The days of being safe from financial ruin while at home with a drink are officially over. Once upon a time, before the advent of the internet, you would get home from a hard day, open up a bottle of your favourite beverage, pour a glass, plop down on the couch and the urge to spend money disappeared; besides you were now drinking – no driving to your local store, it could wait till tomorrow.

Today, there is no end to the kind of trouble you can get into – you can buy shoes, shades, skirts, slippers, books, DVD's, you name it you can buy it on line. But nothing gives you more right-now satisfaction like iTunes ... that music distribution, song for a dollar, wow-I-haven't-heard-that-song-in-ages money sucker.

Suddenly, it doesn't matter that I'm at home on the couch drinking a bottle of Pinot Noir, I can fire up the laptop and start hacking around, listening to tracks and buying stuff at my leisure ... and heck, it's only a buck. But then the dollars start piling up and so do the bad song choices. After half a glass, it's fine to download Stuck in the Middle by Steeler Wheels, a full glass down the hatch and a few early-80's Madonna songs start to appear in your purchased bin – but that seems okay too. Two glasses in and that new Mariah Carey is sounding pretty darn good and by the time the bottle is gone you've got the full Paul Anka catalogue, plus rarities and b-sides, and now your eyeing up the Kenny G.

Home on the couch used to be a safe place to drink, but now, thanks to iTunes, immediate satisfaction and gratification go hand in hand with bad taste. Now, if only I could figure out what I was drinking when I bought Tie a Yellow Ribbon by Tony Orlando and Dawn I'll know never to drink that stuff again.



Wine Event Spotlight: *Hillebrand gets the Blues*

After having spent most of my Saturday at the Hillebrand Jazz Festival, I can tell you that it is one happening place for a concert (review upcoming *On the Road*) – and I have the shirt to prove it. So maybe you're not a jazz fan, maybe you dig the blues. Well Hillebrand has the cure to what ails you with **Blues at the Winery** – Saturday August 9, 2008. Doors open at 2pm and the concert runs from 4 till whenever you are satiated (that's usually sometime around 8pm). Tickets are \$30; visit www.hillebrand.com for more details and the list of acts scheduled to play.

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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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