

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 – 101

Canada's Olympic Raw Deal: The Esprit Issue

February 5, 2009

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News ... *You pick the CRAP and the Grape Guy on the radio*

What CRAP Is This I See Before Me? ... Last newsletter I asked those with a creative mind, and a hate-on for Cellared in Canada wines, to give me some acronyms for the plonk made in Canada's name using "foreign and domestic grape". Many liked the C.R.A.P. acronym I proposed and decided to run with it, making plenty of creative suggestions of what the C.R.A.P. stand for. Here are my nominees for best acronym; now its your turn once again, pick your fav by taking part in the on-line poll.

1. Canadians Reuse Argentine Plonk ... L.P.
2. Crap Required, Always Promoted ... K.S.
3. Certainly Repugnant Adulterated Product ... B.P.
4. Cheap Readily Available Plonk ... K.S.
5. Cellared Rotgut Almost Palpable ... J.C.
6. Cretinous Reproductions of Approved Product ... K.S.
7. Canadian Reared Anti Patriots ... L.P.
8. Cheap Reproductions of Apparent Product ... K.S.

Special Mention:

CRAP - Crawl 'round and Puke

RFC - Really Fing Confusing

WIMP - Wine Includes Mediocre Plonk

KRAP – Knowingly Repugnant Adulterated Product

On the Radio ... On Sunday (January 31, 2009), I made an appearance on the Terry David Mulligan radio show called "Tasting Room Radio" a 2 hour radio show broadcast coast to coast – the interview can be found at www.tastingroomradio.com - January 31 edition, in the time marker of 26:30.



OntarioWineReview: *Deceptive to the Cor*

This past fall (2008) it was quietly announced that Jackson-Triggs (Vincor) would be selling their "Esprit" Olympic wine in the newly created "Olympic retail stores" in British Columbia. This raised a red flag just last week, when a colleague of mine found the announcement during a routine web search. He wondered if the wines available in these stores (2 red / 2 white) were to be the VQA or Cellared in Canada Esprit wines. As many of you know back in May 2008 ([Newsletter #82](#)) I called Vincor out on the carpet for putting the inferior non-VQA wines into the official Olympic Esprit wines. My comments caused quite some controversy for Vincor and made them into "damage-control (aka. spin mode)". They told us that a VQA wine was indeed on the horizon, and published an [explanation](#) on their website as to why they went the non-VQA route. Let's focus on the question at hand: will the wines in the Official Olympic Stores be real Canadian VQA wines, will Vincor

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honor their pledge of providing 100% VQA wine during the Olympics and for all Olympic events? Additional fuel was added to this controversial fire as Vincor ramped up their advertising for this product. One such ad appeared on the back cover of the latest issue of the LCBO's popular Food & Drink magazine, touting Esprit (non-VQA) as the Olympic wine. It would seem that Vincor just might be up to some trickery again and it was time to find out.

Instead of being an irresponsible journalist and laying into them I decided to send off a quick e-mail to Bruce Walker (Vice President of Industry and Media Relations) asking him point blank if the wines being sold in these Olympic stores would in fact be VQA or Cellared in Canada CRAP (see above). Bruce sent me a string of inquiring e-mails – (I'm sure the line "I wish that bastard would leave this issue alone" was a edited out of a few times) – stating: "Yes they will all be VQA. We are also providing the commemorative Inniskillin Icewine and commemorative Sumac Ridge Tribute [Sparkling wine] to the Olympic stores."

Allow me to state that I do not always take at face value the words of a large corporation which has tried to pull the wool over our eyes in the past. To that end, I have sent some mystery shoppers to scout out the stores and confirm the validity of this answer. I look forward to hearing back from them and reporting their findings to you. If you wish to add your voice to those BCers concerned about putting the best face of BC wine forward for all the world to see, feel free to check for yourself and e-mail me your findings (michael@ontariowinereview.com). A note to Vincor here: we are watching ... this issue does not go away until 2010 ... and if it gets screwed up, it may haunt the company for a long time.

On a related issue, fellow wine writer David Lawrason addressed this issue in an open letter, while acting as the National Wine Adviser for the Gold Medal Plates program, a national culinary competition dedicated to 100% Canadian wine. In his letter he states: "Vincor is a major sponsor and they've come on board big time donating hundreds of cases of top quality east and west VQA wine to our events across Canada over the past two years. Esprit has not been seen within this program."

While I agree with Mr. Lawrason that Vincor has been known to sponsor many events and continues to do so, the Olympics is an event on the world stage and has the potential of putting Canadian wine onto that stage. People from all over the world will be coming to the Olympics and will get a chance to try our wines at events, buy it in stores and take it back to their homelands ... Wouldn't it be shameful if they get home and realize they have a bottle of Cellared in Canada wine. The use of Cellared wine to promote a Canadian event is deplorable, though I am ready to tip my hat to Vincor if by 2010 the Cellared in Canada CRAP is off the shelves and 100% VQA is on the tables at Olympic events and on the shelves of British Columbia wine stores ... Nothing less would satisfy this writer or any other lover and supporter of the Canadian wine industry. We are competing on the world stage during the Olympics, 100% VQA wine should be given that same opportunity when the world comes to our door. If the Chinese could do it in Beijing (100% Chinese made wine was served at their events), then lord knows we Canadians can do it too. Keep your eyes open, once again, Vincor I remind you, a nation is watching.



Grape Guy's Picks of the Bunch: VQA-Esprit Revisited

Jackson-Triggs VQA-"Esprit" 2006 Chardonnay – \$12.85 (W)

[Reviewed June 2008](#)

The first VQA white on offer for this official Olympic wine brand still offers pretty good value at the price point and gives \$1.25 from each bottle purchased towards our Olympic athletes. The wine was tasted in conjunction with a small tasting panel of 4 people so as to remove what may be perceived as my potential bias. The nose is oaky, buttery and vanilla driven, while the palate has all the fruit that the nose lacks. Citrus, apple, over ripe pear and a touch of vanilla to round it all out. There is also a pleasant lingering on the palate in the finish. A panel member mentioned, "it's Chardonnay-Light" ... and I would agree.

Jackson-Triggs VQA-"Esprit" 2005 Cabernet - \$13.85 (W)

[Reviewed June 2008](#)

The first VQA red on offer for this official Olympic wine brand still offers pretty good value at the price point and gives \$1.25 from each bottle purchased towards our Olympic athletes. The wine was tasted in conjunction with

a small tasting panel of 4 people so as to remove what may be perceived as my potential bias. The nose is very nice, with cherries and blackberries, along with woody notes and a hint of vanilla. In the mouth, the vanilla disappears, leaving behinds black fruit, herbs and heavy oak-tannins. Quite a dry finish here. I believe this one needs a little more time in the bottle to integrate more fully. Currently, it's "decent, but not a showstopper" one of the panel members said. "The nose is very nice, the taste does not fulfill the promise". Give it 6 months and it should be drinking much better.

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



Weekly Wine Notes and More: *Strewn, Cattail, Reif and plenty more to keep you busy*

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:

February 3, 2009 – Pelee Island 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon/Petit Verdot ([read](#)) ([listen](#))

January 27, 2009 – Reif Estate 2007 Kerner ([read](#)) ([listen](#))

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

[The Trefethen Dinner](#)

[Icewine Festival Winery Tour](#)

[Calamus Futures Tasting](#)

[VinExpo Launch and Announcement](#)

[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

[Creekside 2005 Butler's Grant Rielsing](#)

[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

[Carmela Estates 2004 Pinot Noir](#)

[NEW BLOG – What I'm drinking Tonight](#)

When it's not an Ontario wine, here's what I'm pulling out of the cellar

[There is always something new here](#)

Vintages Releases:

[Ontario "Vintages" Releases: Saturday February 14, 2009](#)

Ontario Wines of Note: [Jackson-Triggs 2003 Proprietors' Grand Reserve Brut](#)

[Le Clos Jordanne 2006 Claystone Terrace Pinot Noir](#), [2006 Le Clos Jordanne Vineyard Pinot Noir](#)

[Chateau des Charmes 2005 Methode Traditionelle Rosé](#)

[Le Clos Jordanne 2006 Claystone Terrace Chardonnay](#)

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OntarioWineReview: *Esprit will bite us all ... (a quick follow up)*

It did not take long for Vincor to show their true colors. With a quick response to my last question (see above) I tried another question that was suggested to me (by fellow wine writer Konrad Ejbich) that seemed more relevant than the first. Konrad asked: "Will every bottle of Esprit wine sold anywhere in the province of British Columbia during the Olympics be VQA?" He continued with this explanation: "The point being, that if a bunch of visiting tourists, or even local attendees, taste a fine VQA Esprit wine at an authorized event, venue or onsite restaurant, and meander over to a regular liquor store anywhere in the province to buy a bottle, will they find that same VQA wine on the shelf?" I sent the question to Bruce and waited ... For 3 days my email in-box was quiet ... (which I took to be my answer). But not satisfied with silence I shot off another question: Is my email being ignored? To which I finally got my answer:

"Regarding the availability of non-VQA Esprit wines, they will be in the retail distribution in all provinces (in addition to VQA), in order to meet our financial obligations to VANOC (and our Olympic athletes) as per our contractual agreement.. Also, as discussed earlier, the fact is there is simply not enough VQA wine available to meet our Olympic wine volume requirements/commitments."

How Vincor can still claim "not enough grapes" in a year where (in Ontario anyway) we dropped 4000 tons of grapes to the ground, is beyond my comprehension. Not enough VQA wine, give me a break. In speaking with another (well respected) wine writer about this issue, I was told that those grapes were simply not viable for making wine. Yet the Grape Growers of Ontario (GGO) paid 77% of those growers with a claim during the \$4-million bail out ... that means that 77% of those grapes were viable for making VQA wine in some form or another ... 77%; that's well over 2300 tonnes (according to officials - <http://www.grapegrowersofontario.com/thegrowers/documents/GGONewsletter-January2009.pdf>) of good grapes that hit the ground. I'm sure that's more than enough to cover what Vincor needed.

Another writer (from Ontario) had these comments: "[we run the risk that] some will try the [sell it in Canada] crap and conclude that this is what Canadian wine is all about. This is a poor way to raise the profile of Canadian wine [at home and abroad] ... the dishonesty, deception and lack of regard for Canada's quality wine industry is what bugs me. If you want to sell low end crap, fine. But when you parade it around as representative of what comes out of [Canada's wine regions], then you offend me to the core."

It is interesting to note that it is not just writers who are up in arms over this issue. Here's what a small winery owner had to say. "The big players are looking at this from a very short-term point of view: How can I minimize my cost to make a barely acceptable \$10.00 bottle of wine versus how can I utilize the great grapes grown here to make a bottle of wine that will raise the bar in terms of Canadian quality and therefore sell at a better price." He then asks the very pertinent question: "Does anyone think that Australia and New Zealand would've risen as quickly in the wine world had they taken a "Cellared in Australia or New Zealand" approach? They care about the reputation of their wines and the branding of their country as a top producer. Why don't we?"

Obviously, in this grower's opinion, Canada does not care about its wine industry enough to step in and make hard choices against large corporations. The deep pockets of Vincor, a Constellation company based in the U.S., is about to bring shame to our national wine identity ... are we powerless to stop it? I hope not. Maybe it's time, and I'm just spitballing here, maybe it's time to boycott Jackson-Triggs and other Vincor products ... that includes Jackson-Triggs, Inniskillin, Sumac Ridge, N'Kmip, and See Ya Later Ranch ... hit them where they'll notice – sales. Until they can guarantee us that the only thing on the shelves in all of British Columbia will be the 100 percent Esprit VQA and not the Esprit Cellared in Canada product.

In my opinion, and I am not alone here, Vincor is about to offend the whole country. Or will they? It is interesting to note that it has been the wine writers in Ontario that seem more offended about this than their BC counterparts; I've not seen word one uttered from the west coast about this issue – and I know some wine writers reside there. Are they too laid back to care? Are we just a bunch of big city boys getting our knickers and a twist? This is an issue that affects us all, coast-to-coast ... Vincor is representing Canada and the Canadian wine industry and they are about to pull off a catastrophic blunder. Then again, maybe it has nothing to do with our thoughts and feelings, maybe it boils down to the almighty dollar; magazines and newspapers don't want to lose that advertising revenue. Is that why those on the West Coast do not seem as offended?

Hold on a minute; let's just give everyone here the benefit of the doubt. Let's remove my cynicism from the mix and see if we can't just find an answer ... and here is my humble suggestion. Sell the Cellared in Canada

wines in the rest of Canada (all nine provinces and three territories) if you must, but please (I'm begging you, a nation begs you) sell only the VQA product in British Columbia at Olympic time (the month of February – January thru March would be better to get them both coming and going) ... but for God's sake don't embarrass this country and make us a laughingstock. What'd'ya say Vincor, can we just play 100% Canadian winemaker for 3 months? That's all I ask, and I'll leave this issue alone. And isn't that what you want? At least that's what you told me in a phone message.

Take a Look for yourself

Jackson-Triggs is perpetrating a fraud on the wine buying public with their barely indistinguishable labels ([picture one](#) – [picture two](#)). Was this on purpose, laziness or a calculated marketing ploy? Interestingly enough the VQA, with all its rules and regulations, does not have one for similar or identical labels on VQA and Cellared in Canada wine - as long as the "terms" protected by the VQA are not on the label or in the description. These labels can exist side by side on store shelves ... and only the truly observant will be able to tell the difference. According to Laurie Macdonald (executive director, VQA inspector) "this is one instance where consumers have to read the fine print". I'm glad to see they really want to protect the consumer from fraudulent Ontario wine – it seems we've gone back to the days of caveat emptor (buyer beware) when it comes to VQA wines. This is yet another big loophole in the system that you could drive a truck through. If this Esprit fiasco will teach us anything, it's that our system is broken, big companies take advantage and that the mighty dollar is King - nothing new here. A prime opportunity to showcase VQA wine squandered. I will not go so far as to call Vincor's marketing department a deceptive, manipulative bunch but they sure do know how to weave a nice thick wool blanket for our collective eyes. You decide: [Label 1](#) and [Label 2](#). Then answer [the on line poll question](#)..



Wine Event Spotlight: *Wine and Chocolate, what could be better?*

The wineries of Niagara-on-the-Lake have expanded to 20. You know, the ones involved in those great events I love to tout ([Wine and Herb](#), [Taste the Season](#)) now number 20 strong ... which means even more to choose from. Now these fabulous wineries amalgamate the 2 best food groups in the world: wine and chocolate, by bringing us the **Days of Wine and Chocolate** event (February 7-8, 14-15 and 21-22). I can't think of a better way of spending a weekend then sipping on wine and eating chocolate. Think of it, Meritage and Dark Chocolate with Cinnamon (Coyote's Run), Cabernet and Pistachio Chocolate (Marynissen), Rosé and Mint Chocolate (Cattail Creek), Late Harvest Vidal and White Chocolate (Lailey), Shiraz and Chili Pepper Chocolate (Jackson-Triggs) – all can be had and plenty more – 15 others more. I'm getting all excited just sitting here thinking about it. Passports to this event are a mere \$30. Details along with a complete list of the chocolate pairing can be found at www.wineriesofniagaraonthelake.com. And you best believe I'll have a full report in my [On the Road with the Grape Guy](#) section just as soon as I swish the sweets from my teeth.

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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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