

Sipping in style

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“I’ve been a wine lover since I watched John Steed of *The Avengers* offer a glass of claret wine to Emma Peel,” jests our guide Christopher Juras of Niagara Vintage Wine Tours as he welcomes us to a day of luxury touring through Niagara’s wine country. Steed, the stylish spy of the 1960s British television series, would have enjoyed this tour.

Our own group of just two couples will also be ‘gathering intelligence’ in four top Niagara-on-the-Lake wineries today with custom tours and tastings courtesy of **Niagara Vintage Wine Tours**. We will travel in style, in a luxurious Mercedes Sprinter Executive Touring vehicle, linger over lunch at a country inn, and taste some of Ontario’s most distinctive wines, all with the assistance of an astute guide who has worked in grape cultivation and studied geography at Brock University.

“A lot of the wines we are tasting today will not be found at liquor stores. They are artisanal wines,” explains Juras. “We have room for 30 cases in the back (of the vehicle) so you can buy as much or as little as you like, but almost all wineries will sell direct online and ship.” Tasting, however, can only be done in person!

Juras is an oenophile with extensive knowledge of all aspects of wine production— from grape growing to wine tasting. But more importantly, he has the gift of making ‘brix’ and ‘canopy cover management’ sound interesting. Our first stop is at the Lake Ontario waterfront vineyard of Konzelmann Estate Winery for a lesson in the geography of the Niagara Escarpment. Its limestone-rich soils, ancient lakebed and the moderating effects of Lake Ontario all help to create this perfect oasis for wine growing.

“Since the early 1970s, the temperatures have progressively warmed, making it possible to grow a greater variety of grapes,” explains Juras. As he demonstrates the techniques for pruning, he adds, “Growers are now experimentally planting Malbec, Sangiovese and Shiraz, but still no Zinfandel.”

With its stone exterior and peaked red rooftops, Konzelmann might be mistaken for a Teutonic baron’s castle. We enter expecting a formality to the structured tasting, but Simon Bentall welcomes our party with a short history of the winery and a lighthearted approach to the many delights of its Germanic style wines. “There’s nothing wrong with French wine,” begins Bentall. But it’s clear where his allegiance lies as he pours a Gewürtztraminer, followed by a late harvest Vidal which “the Germans call ‘Auslese’ because it has been affected by botrytis (thereby intensifying sweetness and flavor).

Juras pays careful attention to our personal preferences. Noticing my fondness for the Gewürz, he asks Bentall to bring out Konzelmann’s 2011 late harvest Riesling Traminer. “This is not a blend,” he explains, but “a genetic crossing of Riesling and Gewürtztraminer into a hybrid found in only eight wineries around the world.” Learning that this wine is grown from cuttings of 120-year-old vines adds to the mystique.

Taking time to answer our questions with care, Bentall and Juras never descend into wine snobbery. Bentall happily demonstrates the aerator that saves time decanting and explains that screw-capped bottles

will keep wine longer than those capped with corks. It's barely 11 a.m. and we've already given up on writing notes in our journal. The task at hand lies instead in our wine glasses and on our palates. Thankfully someone else is tasked with the driving and directions.

At Pillitteri Estates winery, a traditional Sicilian hand-painted cart signifies Italian heritage but the wine making emphasis is on a very Canadian product: icewine. Winery tour guide Brittany Friesmen leads us downstairs to the monastery-like barrel cellar where she explains how Pillitteri has made a name for itself by pushing the boundaries of which grapes can be used for Canadian icewine. "This is the only place in the world where you can make icewine from Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot because of the consistent freezing in winter," Friesman says. In fact, thin-skinned red grapes easily get lesions in which botrytis can grow and act as antifreeze. Who knew?

After sampling some eight or so wines at two wineries, our palates do begin to blur, so lunch at Niagara-on-the-Lake's Oban Inn, a landmark since 1824, provides a welcome break. "Oh, you're on a wine tour," says our waitress with a knowing expression. "You'll be wanting some bread right away and lots of water."

In the afternoon, the focus changes to touring much newer wineries. We feel lucky to visit PondView Estate Winery early in the week and early in the season. "On weekends as many as 250 people will be here tasting, and enjoying wine and cheese out on the deck," says Juras. It may be one of the region's newest wineries, but it's run by the Puglisi family with who have a long history of viticulture in Niagara. Already, their winery enjoys a winning reputation.

The most enjoyable feature of visiting up-and-coming wineries is that you are likely to meet the principals. At Hinterbrook Estate Winery we are greeted by Andrew Nickel whose family owns the environmentally-sustainable facility. "There's mom. You can call her Charlotte," he indicates with a smile, gesturing to a lady behind the counter as he leads us toward the barrels of aging wines.

"Franc Blanc is our signature wine," says Nickel, explaining how they made a white wine from this red grape. "In 2010 we felt we had a lot of Cab Franc production...It was experimental—and fun." One can certainly do this when a winery has a great winemaker like Natalie Spytkowski. But when the original 50 cases sold out quickly, production was expanded. "Cabernet Franc can be a silk purse or a sow's ear, it has definite sow's ear potential," explains Nickel. "You have to let it hang on the vine long enough to let methoxypryazines (odor-producing chemicals) break down. Otherwise you would end up with celery wine."

Returning to our hotel, with cases stacked in the back of the van, we know Juras was right. These are wines and winemakers that we could not have found anywhere else. And this tour highlights the distinctions of each winery and this very special region.

And then Juras gives us another reason for embarking on a return tasting tour. "We are particularly proud of repeatedly winning the TripAdvisor Award of Excellence," adds Juras. "It's a badge of honour for the whole team at Niagara Vintage Wine Tours." Definitely a proposal for another "Cheers!"

www.niagaravintagewinetours.com

SIDEBAR

Private cellar tours at Vintage Inns

Underneath the Prince of Wales hotel is a hidden treasure: A vaulted cellar made of reclaimed bricks housing some 5,000 bottles of wine. Niagara's top V.Q.A. wines are found here—sometimes long after they have sold out at wineries—as well as aged Burgundians and Bordeaux that sell for as much as \$1,500 a bottle. But the real treasure is Chef Sommelier Fred Gamula who has been advising guests for some 25 years on which wines would best suit their elegant meals at Escabeche, the hotel's restaurant.

Gamula judges wines for the Ontario Lieutenant Governor's wine awards, narrowing some 250 wines down to a select group of 12. He also teaches a sommelier course at Niagara College, but you can take advantage of his vast wealth of knowledge on a private cellar tour included in the hotel's new Papparazzi package offered this summer. Gamula says that Ontario wines account for more than 70percent of sales at the Prince of Wales. And he takes pride in introducing them to visitors. On a recent cellar tour we sampled three of "Niagara's top single varietals."

As he pours the Cave Springs Dolomite Riesling, he explains. “One of the biggest hurdles we face is that so many people are drinking red, but this is a cool climate much better suited to whites, particularly Riesling,” he states. “People think they won’t like Riesling because they remember those sweeter versions from their college days, and now you almost have to pour it down their throats to convince them to try it. But a Riesling can be everything from bone dry to icewine.” A sip of that complex Riesling with its citrus and mineral zing is all it took to convince us.

To round out our tour: a Henry of Pelham chardonnay with a “great sense of place...perfect with grilled chicken” and a Château des Charmes cabernet franc... “great with burgers and lamb.” Certainly, at just 30 minutes, our visit to this impressive private cellar seemed all too short.

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