

# Into Canada's vineyards

Even though Canada has been producing wines for the last 100 years, it has less than a 50% share of its own market. However, the Canadian wine market has been increasing its share since the late '90s. We take a look at the Canadian wine story and where it's headed.

*Text & Photographs: Lana Bukvic*

**W**ith its cold climate, Canada is better known for its harsh long winters and ice hockey rather than wine. Yet, the country represents one of the newest regions in the New World and its wine sector is gaining domestic and international popularity. The continuous dedication of Canadian winemakers over the last 50 years has led to not only achieving the goal of producing wines that typify the character of the grapes, but also ones which are expressing a distinctive trait of the area and climate in which they are grown.

"Wines from Canada are fruit forward as a result of the nice hot summers. Grapes ripen more fully and offer beautiful taste profiles. Master winemaking techniques

combined with Mother Nature allow for the production of some world-class wines," says Atticia Grondin, Trade Marketing Manager for Andrew Peller Limited, one of the oldest and most recognised wine companies in Canada.

#### **To the past and present**

Canada's first commercial vineyard, Vin Villa, was established in Ontario in 1866, but it was only in the 1970s that the country experienced growth in viticulture. Canada's wine industry credits Donald Ziraldo and Karl Kaiser, as the founding fathers of Canadian wine. These two wine visionaries helped pave the way for the industry, and created a boutique winery called Inniskillin in 1975, which was the very first winery to receive a licence since prohibition in 1929. Today, there





are over 700 licensed wineries all across Canada.

Presently, Canada's success in the wine sector can well be attributed to new investments in world-class wineries, selective wine offerings, having a new generation of innovative and masterful winemakers, and increased international recognition of its ability to produce quality wines at competitive prices.

The entrepreneurial philosophy of Canadian wineries and the embracing of innovations in viticulture have also driven growth.

**Wine regions**

The largest wine producing regions in Canada are in the Okanagan Valley, on the west coast of British Columbia, and in the Niagara Peninsula, just outside of Toronto in Ontario. While these two wine producing regions are located on the opposite sides of the country and are several thousand miles apart, each offers suitable climate characteristics to allow for specific grape varieties to bring out their maximum potential when combined with skilful viticulture. Both these regions have attracted the most talented winemakers from all around the world including France, Australia, California, New Zealand and South Africa.

For many, it is difficult to believe that a country so far north is able to deliver high quality wines. As

it turns out, Ontario's Niagara Peninsula, which is the largest viticulture area in Canada, is located between 41° and 44° N latitude, which is on the same band as those of Burgundy (France); Chianti Classico (Italy), Rioja (Spain), and Mendocino Valley (California, USA). Similarly, the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, also falls in the northern hemisphere's wine-growing belt at approximately 39° N and shares the same latitude as northern German and French vineyards.

"In Niagara, we have warm air coming in the winter which creates an escarpment, and offers moderate air flow from The Great Lakes to the vineyards. The escarpment also ensures a prolonged growing season," notes Deborah Pratt, Head of Public Relations, for highly-acclaimed Canadian wineries, Inniskillin, Jackson-Triggs, and Le Clos Jordanne, which have





flavours and aromas.”

**Icewine**

Getting noticed in the international wine sector for Canada was no easy task and it was only in 1991, when Inniskillin went up against 4,100 international wines to win France’s 1991 Grand Prix d’Honneur for its icewine (which was first made by the same winery in the Okanagan Valley in 1973), that trade and consumers began to pay attention to Canadian wines. Since then, both the Okanagan

several vineyards located in both the Niagara Peninsula and the Okanagan Valley. “The Okanagan Valley is nestled among coastal mountains, which are great for blocking heavy winds. The desert-like conditions combined with adequate amounts of sunlight with minimal rainfall provide a great landscape for viticulture.”

While both regions offer a cool climate and rich fertile soil, each has its own micro-climate suitable for growing a diversity of vines. Subsequently, winemakers are not only able to experiment with different varietals while relying on their expertise in winemaking but also learn what best works to express the terroir.

“The foundation of our success comes from the fact that we produce premium wines from premium grapes that grow in Niagara peninsula and Okanagan,” says Pratt. “We are known to be in a cool climate area, which offers acidity and great structure to the wines produced adding a range of

**CANADA’S FIRST COMMERCIAL VINEYARD, VIN VILLA, WAS ESTABLISHED IN ONTARIO WAY BACK IN 1866.**



Valley and the Niagara regions have been widely recognised as the world's leading producers of icewine, ahead of Austria and Germany.

Today, Canada is the largest producer of icewines in the world and it produces over 2 million 375ml bottles of icewine annually. The average price of \$45/bottle in Canada is as high as \$225 in Japan and is often given as an official gift from Canada to heads of state and dignitaries. Canadian icewines are produced for the most

Jackson Triggs, and Andrew Peller are some of the top producers of icewine, which focused on leveraging icewine as a unique luxury product, and succeeded in luring consumers to try out other styles of wine as well.

#### The cool whites

The white grape varietals which have adapted well to Canada's rich soil and climate include Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer, Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier, as well as Riesling

are rich with typical flavours of rose and lychee, and aromatic Sauvignon Blancs, in both Ontario and British Columbia, give off notes of citrus, melon and fig. Viognier vines create full-bodied and fruity wines with bold, peach flavours. Rieslings from the Niagara region merit attention for delivering crisp and elegant wines in all styles, from dry and off-dry table wines recognised by bright citrus notes of lime and grapefruit, to honeyed, late harvest dessert styles including late harvest wines and icewine.

#### The beautiful reds

An increasing number of red wine varieties are being grown in British Columbia's wine region, where the hot, desert climate and long, northern-latitude growing season create climates well suited for



part in the Niagara region, as it is the only major wine region that has a consistent cold climate to allow the production of icewine of almost every vintage. In order to pick the grapes, temperatures must be at least -8° to -10° Celsius. Icewines offer notes and flavours of succulent tropical fruits and spices, and are sweet and full on the palate with a nice balancing acidity. While most icewines are made from the Riesling grape, late harvest wines from the French hybrid, Vidal, are also capable of producing voluptuous icewines, reminiscent of peach, honeysuckle, and pear.

Wineries such as Inniskillin,

and Vidal, which are integral in the production of icewine.

Canadian Chardonnays are known for their well-formed structure supported by natural acidity and ripe fruit, and are highly produced in Ontario. In British Columbia, on the other hand, Pinot Blanc has been particularly successful with offering flavour and aroma as well as spicy Pinot Gris with depth and complexity. Other white varietals less common but which have produced impressive wines in British Columbia include Auxerrois, Bacchus, Chenin Blanc, Ehrenfelser, and Semillon.

Gewürztraminers from Niagara



many red varieties. The Okanagan Valley particularly does well with the Bordeaux trio of Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and Cabernet Sauvignon, which is labelled “Meritage”. Merlot, especially, has shown great promise with velvety wines with hints of plum and cassis, and is the top red varietal grown in British Columbia.

Canadian Cabernet Franc ranges from lighter versions of spices and raspberry, to rich and age-worthy styles of cassis and chocolate. Cabernet Sauvignon has shown itself to be increasingly successful in Canadian conditions, and is producing complex full-



*Inniskillin distillery analyses soil and site carefully thus producing one of the best Icewines in the world.*

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bodied wines on its own or in Bordeaux blends commonly known as “Meritage”.

Syrah, also known as Shiraz, represents the newest varietal in the Canadian repertoire for winemakers. Syrah, in Ontario’s Niagara region, is showing signs of classic white peppery spice, as produced in the northern Rhone, while in the southern Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, it seems to resemble the richness and power of an Australian Shiraz. Gamay Noir and Pinot Noir, respectively, are

jam-packed with berry fruit, and both are largely produced in the Niagara region.

**Canadian wines in India**

Although Canada is still new on the New World map, it is understandable that such a new player may not be associated as a wine producing country to the growing population of India’s wine culture. Although Inniskillin’s icewine was most recently launched in India in the Duty-Free segment (New Delhi and Mumbai Airports), consumer perceptions, marketing,

and education greatly influence purchase decisions.

“There is no doubt that icewine will do extremely well in India but the concept as a dessert wine or as dessert has to transcend into people’s mind. In retail, it will always be too expensive and at a hotel, it can change an ordinary meal into a celebratory meal. Knowledgeable and motivated sommeliers are important for that to happen,” explains Subhash Arora, founder of the Delhi Wine Club and the President of Indian Wine Academy.

As increased marketing efforts and education are necessary, it may take a few more years before a new generation of wine writers, importers, and sommeliers in India turn to Canadian wines to treat their palates. When that moment arrives, it is assumed that wine lovers in India will toast enthusiastically with a glass of premium Canadian wine, perhaps icewine, leaving a sweet and savoury fruity finish, which will peak their interests to try other noteworthy wines that Canada has to offer. 🍷