

ONTARIO CHARDONNAY

There's more to eastern Canada than maple syrup, ice hockey and endless frozen winters. And while the latter helps with icewine, that's not what's causing a buzz. If you love cool-climate Chardonnay with a real sense of place, then don't think Burgundy, think Ontario

WORDS & SELECTION TINA GELLIE

Telling people I was heading on a work trip to the Niagara Peninsula, in Canada's eastern province of Ontario, the response was invariably 'oh, for the icewine'. Even friends from my birth city of Ottawa, Canada's capital and a 5.5-hour drive from the heart of the winelands, were surprised that anything else would lure a wine writer across the pond.

Just as there are lingering outdated perceptions that all Sherry and German Riesling is sweet and old fashioned, it seems there's still a way to go to convince the general public that Ontario has many (many) more strings to its winemaking bow.

While the first vinifera vines of the modern era were planted in 1974 and the first winery licence post-prohibition registered in 1975, the Ontario wine industry didn't really kick off domestically until the 1990s. The first wine (yes, an icewine) didn't hit British shelves until 2001, and by 2013 – only a decade ago – there were still only three Ontario wineries exporting still wines to the UK.

That number has since tripled, but boutique production coupled with high export costs mean that for many Ontario producers, keeping back an allocation for export, knowing it could immediately be sold to a captive domestic market, is just not a viable option. And, in a familiar vinous vicious cycle, this contributes to the lack of awareness of Ontario's increasingly serious-quality wines, of which Chardonnay is the star, representing 9.4% of Ontario's grape production in 2022 (*data from Wine Marketing Association of Ontario*).

To increase my own awareness, I recently spent a week in the Niagara region, about an hour's drive from Toronto, getting to grips with its geology and geography, which is key to the elegance, structure, density and vibrancy of these ageworthy wines.

NIAGARA PENINSULA – THE LAY OF THE LAND

Today, more than 190 wineries operate under Ontario's Vintners Quality Alliance (VQA) appellation system, with 100 of them in the Niagara Peninsula – the largest area under vine in Canada, with 5,500ha.

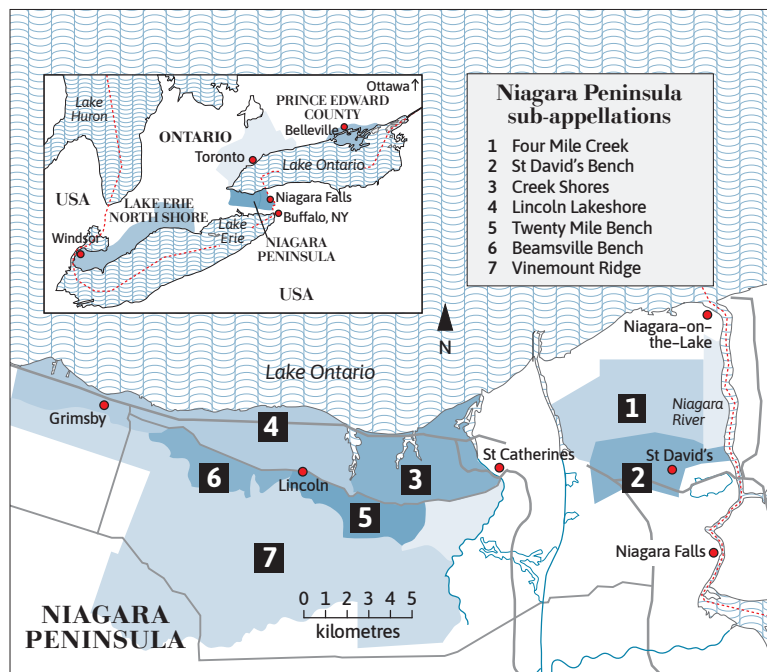
This is a terroir-driven region, and the winemakers regularly reference Burgundy when talking about villages, slopes, limestone bedrock and cool climate – perhaps natural given the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir (both still and sparkling) they excel in. And like Burgundy's crus, decades of grape-growing and research has identified 10 distinct growing areas.

Starting from the east is the **Niagara-on-the-Lake** regional appellation, under which sit four sub-appellations, with **Four Mile Creek** being ►

Hidden Bench Vineyards,
Beamsville Bench (see
wine notes, p83)



Above: Thomas Bachelder with *Decanter's* Tina Gellie at Le Grand Clos vineyard on Twenty Mile Bench (see wine notes, p84),



the largest and St David's Bench notable for its elevations of up to 180m. About 20km west, past the town of St Catharines and right along the shores of Lake Ontario, are the Niagara Peninsula sub-appellations of Creek Shores and Lincoln Lakeshore. Apart from St David's Bench, all these other sub-appellations lie on the plain, the vines planted in a mix of loamy clay sand and silt. The area around the town of Grimsby, however, less than 1.5km from the lake, and whose limestone-rich hillside vineyards abut the benchlands, has a unique terroir and is in the process of seeking its own sub-appellation.

Rising above the plain, planted on a 30m fossil-rich limestone slope carved out by glacial activity and rising to 185m in elevation, are the benchlands of the Niagara Escarpment, home to three sub-appellations stretching across more than 25km, including the heralded Twenty Mile Bench and Beamsville Bench.

Finally, above them, just over the undulating brow of the escarpment, on a mix of limestone and loam, is Vinemount Ridge, whose east- and south-facing vineyards – the highest in Niagara at 200m – are unique.

Unique because all the Peninsula's other vineyards face north, which might seem unusual in such a cool-climate wine region, but all possible because of Lake Ontario. In winters perfect for icewine, the lake moderates the climate and also cools down the vines during the hot, humid summers here – the Peninsula shares the same 43°N latitude as Tuscany.

This moderating influence helps give Niagara Chardonnays in particular real grace and electricity through marked acidity. Winemakers are, in general, hands off in the cellar, preferring foudres and puncheons to barrels and tending to use less new oak in order to maximise sense of place and fruit purity. Bracing acidities are tempered by long lees contact, but no stirring, which also contributes to their texture.

COUNTY & VALLEY

Moving some 300km east, across to the opposite shore of Lake Ontario, you reach Prince Edward County, Ontario's most northerly appellation and home to 29 wineries. Its low-lying, low-yielding vineyards on limestone bedrock and stony soils are virtually surrounded by water, with cold winters and hot summers again moderated by the lake.

Burgundian varieties are predominant here, both still and sparkling, but Chardonnay has the edge, achieving ripeness at just 12% alcohol (12.5% in Niagara), but with similar concentration and nervy acidity, the best showcasing delicate florals and a distinctive flinty minerality.

If friends in Ottawa were unaware of the quality of table wines made along Lake Ontario, they will be even more shocked to know that impressive Chardonnays are being made on their doorstep. Some 250km north of Prince Edward County, the Ottawa River Valley is one of Ontario's emerging wine regions, just a 30-minute drive from Canada's Parliament. There are only a handful of producers, but the limestone-rich soils and warm summers are ideal for cool-climate varieties.

Ontario's remaining VQA region, Lake Erie North Shore, and three other emerging regions produce good wines from a range of varieties but the terroir is not suited to Chardonnay.

I've spent a lot of time on terroir but, as every Burgundy lover knows, that's what makes great wines. This was amply demonstrated at the International Cool Climate Chardonnay Celebration, which marked its 13th year at its July event in Niagara, where more than 30 Ontario wineries stood shoulder to shoulder with others from across Canada as well as Burgundy, Jura, Italy, New Zealand, Germany and Chile.

Ontario's Chardonnays, particularly those from Niagara's benchlands, are world class – even if most of the world hasn't yet had the opportunity to discover them. It's only a matter of time before that changes. Until then, here are 20 to try...



The seated tasting area at Thirty Bench Wine Makers, near Beamsville

Twenty top cool-climate Ontario Chardonnays to try

① **Bachelder, Wismer-Foxcroft Nord, Twenty Mile Bench, Niagara Escarpment 2021** 95

POA £ Liberty Wines

CA\$55 bachelderniagara.com

How to choose just one single-vineyard Chardonnay from the 11 that the inspirational and influential duo Thomas and Mary Delaney-Bachelder produce? Another day it might be Hill of Wingfield, Grimsby Frontier... but for now, it's this. Foxcroft is an undoubted 'grand cru' which always seems to deliver concentrated, complex wines with distinct seaspray and lemon curd nuances. Thomas prefers this vintage over the riper, rounder 2020, for its piquant acidity and mineral focus. A complete package from the terroiristes of Niagara. **Drink** 2023-2030 **Alcohol** 13.5%

② **Cloudsley Cellars, Foxcroft Vineyard, Twenty Mile Bench, Niagara Escarpment 2020** 95

CA\$60 cloudsleycellars.com

My favourite Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs at the annual Canada tasting in London in May, whose quality was confirmed when I visited proprietor Adam Lowy and winemaker Matt Smith in July. Planted in 1996 by the Wismer family, the Foxcroft vineyard, 5km from Lake Ontario on

exposed lower clay slopes, shows its pedigree again here: flinty elegance yet sinewy muscle – much more on the citrus spectrum than Wingfield, with smoky charred grapefruit pith notes, perky acidity, seaspray and well-judged oak (40% new).

Drink 2023-2030 **Alc** 13%

Cloudsley Cellars, Wingfield Vineyard, Twenty Mile Bench, Niagara Escarpment 2020 94

CA\$60 cloudsleycellars.com

The Wismer family's Wingfield vineyard is about 1km further from Lake Ontario than Foxcroft and higher, cooler and more protected on the slope, says proprietor Adam Lowy. In 2020 he let the later-ripening grapes hang longer than usual which has resulted in an opulent and rich but not heavy palate of ripe nectarine, pear and dried mango. While Foxcroft sees 40% new oak for 18 months, it's 33% here – both being well integrated and contributing to impressive texture, length and ageability.

Drink 2023-2030 **Alc** 13%

③ **Leaning Post, Grimsby Hillside, Lincoln Lakeshore, Niagara Escarpment 2020** 94

POA £ The Good Wine Shop

CA\$40 (2019) leaningpostwines.com

An exciting discovery at London's annual Canada tasting followed up by an impressive visit confirms that this winery (opened in 2011) is one to watch. Sourced from the wild, stony Grimsby Hillside vineyard, where Niagara's first vines were planted in the 1870s, this delivers a unique expression: banoffee pie oak creaminess, ripe plums, green mango acidity and lingering chalky texture. This cuvée will just be called Frontier Block from 2021, with the hope that 'Grimsby Narrows' becomes an official sub-region. **Drink** 2023-2030 **Alc** 13% ▶





Rob Power, head winemaker at Queenston Mile (see wine No5, below)

Leaning Post, Senchuk Vineyard, Lincoln Lakeshore, Niagara Escarpment 2020 93

£42 (2019) The Good Wine Shop

CA\$50 leaningpostwines.com

From Ilya and Nadia Senchuk's home vineyard, planted in 2012, this is a serious, complex and complete example of Chardonnay, finding great balance between fruit weight and freshness, approachability and long-term gain. Aromas of juicy pear and dried peach lead on to a midweight palate whose core of fine oak framework and pithy grapefruit acidity is fleshed out by spiced nectarine compote, a chalky mouthfeel, wet pebble minerality and long citrus finish. **Drink** 2023-2029 **Alc** 13%

Hidden Bench, Felseck Vineyard, Beamsville Bench, Niagara Escarpment 2020 92

CA\$48 hiddenbench.com

Always an impressive organic single-vineyard wine, sourced mainly from 1992-planted vines, it is even more so in 2020. Heady sweet peach and nectarine aromas turn to juice on the opulent, silky palate, where caramel-coated nuts, popcorn and vanilla custard add richness and complexity. The oak is there, but so

is lipsmacking acidity and a briny oyster tang. **Drink** 2023-2028 **Alc** 13.9%

④ Malivoire, Moira, Beamsville Bench, Niagara Escarpment 2020 92

CA\$44.95 malivoire.com

Visionary Martin Malivoire and winemaker Shiraz Mottiar create myriad wines whose quality defies their modest prices. Sourced from select rows of the vineyard named after Martin's wife, this Chardonnay is wild fermented and aged on lees in puncheons for nine months, delivering enviable texture and poise in the crisp orchard fruit, lifted by lemon verbena freshness. **Drink** 2023-2028 **Alc** 12.5%

⑤ Queenston Mile, St David's Bench, Niagara-on-the-Lake 2021 92

CA\$35 queenstonmilevineyard.com

While the sold-out 2020 was 'more Meursault' with its richness and concentration, this 2021 vintage is back to being 'Puligny' in all its steely minerality, says winemaker Rob Power (above). Aromas of citrus oil and ripe nectarine lead on to a weighty palate whose yellow plum and peach curd creaminess is balanced by lemon sherbet acidity and vanilla oak spice. **Drink** 2023-2028 **Alc** 13%

20 TOP ONTARIO CHARDONNAYS

Rosehall Run, St Cindy, Prince Edward County 2020 92

CA\$74 rosehallrun.com

Not seen since the winery's maiden vintage in 2004 and again in 2005, this cuvée, named for the winemaker's sister-in-law, returns in this intense yet refined vintage. Distinctive chalky flintiness lends great tension and balances the plush, concentrated peach, while toasty popcorn oak and quinine-like crisp acidity will ensure it matures well.

Drink 2023-2030 **Alc** 13.5%

Thirty Bench, Small Lot, Beamsville Bench, Niagara Escarpment 2021 92

CA\$38 thirtybench.com

Winemaker Emma Garner's Rieslings and Cabernet Francs are the standouts at this exciting estate, but the same elegance, focus and length is showcased here. The racy, bone-dry palate has a lovely vein of wet-pebble minerality that complements the fleshy lemon, creamy peach and judicious oak spice. Super balance between richness and delicacy. **Drink** 2023-2029 **Alc** 12.6%

⑥ Westcott Vineyards, Block 76, Vinemount Ridge, Niagara Peninsula 2021 92

£29.99 Daniel Lambert

CA\$50 westcottvineyards.com

An impressive third iteration of this, Grant Westcott and Carolyn Hurst's first foray into a single-expression wine. From a 0.4ha Chardonnay block planted in 2016 on the home vineyard, the chalky texture, flinty minerals and creamy oyster salinity stand out, alongside crisp green apple acidity. The oak is well handled, not impinging on the clarity of fruit. **Drink** 2023-2029 **Alc** 13% ▶



20 TOP ONTARIO CHARDONNAYS

Bachelder, Les Villages Bench, Niagara Escarpment 2021 91

£39.99 (2020) Shelved Wine

CA\$34.95 bachelderniagara.com

Thomas and Mary Delaney-Bachelder produce two Village Chardonnays – one, a multi-site blend from Niagara-on-the-Lake and this, from five sites up on the Escarpment – which is made identically to showcase their terroir. The former is riper, peachy and bold, whereas this one shows perky samphire, green apple and minerally lemon tones. Both are great buys and a perfect introduction to Niagara Chardonnay. **Drink** 2023-2028 **Alc** 13.5%

Cave Spring Vineyard, CSV, Beamsville Bench, Niagara Escarpment 2021 91

POA £ Yorkshire Vintners

CA\$34.95 cavespring.ca

Riesling and sparkling are the highlights here but this top-end Chardonnay, from the seven oldest rows (47 years) of the estate vineyard, is worth a look. Racy and fresh, with firm chalky minerality and a bite of cider apple skin bitterness, it spends 20 months ageing on wild yeast lees in neutral oak, giving weighty flavours of creamy bircher muesli oatiness and a nutty cinnamon finish. **Drink** 2023-2028 **Alc** 13.5%

Le Clos Jordanne, Le Grand Clos, Twenty Mile Bench, Niagara Escarpment 2020 91

£38.99 (2019) Shelved Wine

CA\$49.95 greateststatesniagara.com

The original winemaker here from 2005 to 2009, Thomas Bachelder was lured back in 2017 to revive the brand. Burgundian



Tawse vineyard manager Augusta Van Muyen with the winery's resident goats

methods rule in vineyard and cellar, and the always ultra-chalky Grand Clos – his 'grand cru of Niagara' – is impressive and showy in 2020, with lashings of creamy, toasty oak over rich praline and dried peach, cut through with a bite of lemon.

Drink 2023-2029 **Alc** 13%

⑦ Tawse, Robyn's Block, Twenty Mile Bench, Niagara Escarpment 2021 91

CA\$46.95 (2020) tawsewinery.ca

Planted in 1981, Robyn's Block has Moray Tawse's oldest Chardonnay vines, and its clay-loam soils give a more generous style than the zippy, mineral citrus of the Quarry Road vineyard, whose 2019 is delicious. More puncheons (50%) and less new oak (now 20%) have helped dial back the opulence of previous vintages, but this upcoming release still boasts rich dried mango, ripe peach and butterscotch tones.

Drink 2023-2028 **Alc** 12.5%

Two Sisters Vineyards, Barrel-Fermented, Beamsville Bench, Niagara Escarpment 2020 91

CA\$57.80 twosistersvineyards.com

Sourced from the 1959-planted Lenko Vineyard, Canada's oldest Chardonnay vines deliver real concentration that will appeal to those looking for forward, spiced apple-pie richness supported by roasted hazelnut tones from ageing in French oak barrels (nine months in 20% new wood). The vibrant and mineral unoaked version, with 30% of Lenko fruit, is also a good buy.

Drink 2023-2028 **Alc** 13%

⑧ 13th Street, L Viscek Vineyard, Creek Shores, Niagara Peninsula 2021 90

CA\$39.95 13thstreetwinery.com

Before heading to Niagara, winemaker JP Colas worked at Domaine Laroche in Chablis, so he knows a thing or two about Chardonnay. This is a rich, ripe style, whose flavours suggest custard-filled brioche, spiced apple, warm hay and candied peel, with creamy nougat notes from spending a year in oak. The 13th Street NV Blanc de Blancs Brut Nature sparkling is equally good. **Drink** 2023-2027 **Alc** 12.5%

⑨ Kin Vineyards, Carp Ridge, Ontario 2020 90

CA\$32 (2019) kinvineyards.com

The Ottawa River Valley is one of Ontario's emerging wine regions, and Kin – which lies just a 30-minute drive from Canada's Parliament – grows the province's most northerly Chardonnay. Made more like a Chablis during what was a tricky vintage here, it spent nine months in neutral oak and tank, delivering crisp green apple, lemon oil and creamy porridge oat characters. **Drink** 2023-2026 **Alc** 13.5%

Stratus, Unfiltered & Bottled with Lees, Niagara-on-the-Lake 2021 90

POA £ Bibendum Wine

CA\$49 stratuswines.com

The lees remaining in bottle means the wine has a hazy appearance but it helps to amp up the texture in this unique style. Fermented and aged in French oak and clay amphora, the flavours sing of rich lemon posset with a crunchier green apple tang. And snap up the 2022 Trials Zero Zero Chardonnay (no additions, no filtration) before it sells out on release in April 2024.

Drink 2023-2026 **Alc** 13.3%

Trius, Showcase, The Watching Tree Vineyard Wild Ferment, Lincoln Lakeshore, Niagara Peninsula 2020 90

CA\$38 triuswines.com

From a landmark winery, restaurant, event venue and hotel complex on Niagara-on-the-Lake, this premium cuvée is from a late-ripening single vineyard in the far west of the Peninsula, planted in 1989. Aromas of baked lemons, sweet hay and spiced apple follow on the round palate, which shows good balancing acidity and butterscotch oak notes. **Drink** 2023-2027 **Alc** 12.8% 