

# Labour of Love

BY MICHAEL PINKUS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVEN ELPHICK





**S**o you wanna grow some grapes, make wine and live the lush, bucolic life of a vigneron? I would suggest France or Italy, maybe even Greece, Portugal or Spain, because in Prince Edward County you'll be working too hard to take it easy. Life in this, the newest viticulture area of Ontario, isn't all grapevines and sunshine. It might be coming on summertime, but the living sure ain't easy.

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“I think hard work is a term I’d use,” says Huff Estates winemaker Frederic Picard, “hard work and patience.” Ontario’s newest Designated Viticulture Area (DVA) is currently home to some 33 vineyards and wineries, many of which are here despite the challenges they face. In fact, the owners seem to relish it – they’ve come here to live the dream of making great wine and pioneering a new frontier in the wine world.

“Prince Edward County is a young region with more challenges than most regions in the world,” Picard says. But behind his words is a passion that everyone here shares. “We’re blessed,” says Victoria Rose of Long Dog Winery. “We have enjoyed the challenge of being pioneers in the wine regions,” says Richard Johnson of By Chadsey’s Cairn. “Making it here is not easy,” says Catherine Langlois of Sandbanks Winery, “but if you believe in it, you have to try it.” And Geoff Webb of Black Prince Winery is even more succinct and enthusiastic about his PEC pride: “Watch out, Niagara.”

It’s that kind of pride that makes Prince Edward County a great place to visit, spend a weekend and get to know. But it’s not just pride that makes it so special and ultimately unique. Speak to any winemaker or vineyard owner and the same words will be on his or her lips: “Challenge”, “terroir” [the French word for soil, that nourishing earth that gives a wine its flavour, or what Matt Kramer of Wine Spectator magazine once termed as “somewhere-ness”] and “Pinot Noir”.

“The magic of PEC’s terroir is that it’s so similar to Burgundy, especially because of all that limestone,” says Rose; and as everybody knows, Burgundy is the home of Pinot Noir. With only a few exceptions, every County winery is trying its hand at making the ultimate wine from the Heartbreak Grape. Some are even betting the entire farm on it. Norman Hardie, a man who has made wine in many of world’s finest wine regions, came here to focus his attention on Pinot Noir. “Where there are great growing conditions, in a great year or a bad year, we will always have the



CAROLINE GRANGER  
THE GRANGE OF PRINCE  
EDWARD COUNTY

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FREDERIC PICARD  
HUFF ESTATES

opportunity to make something remarkable,” he said in a recent interview in *Vines* magazine.

Picard came to Prince Edward County via Niagara, (where he was working with fellow Frenchman Jean-Pierre Colas at Peninsula Ridge). He came for the challenge and with a maverick's conviction that he could make the best Merlot in these parts. Even he hasn't forsaken the notion of Pinot Noir in the County—he has tried his hand at it with a private-label brand with marketing director Karen MacLaurin (Brunet), appropriately called Picard-MacLaurin.

Winemakers don't just come from the four corners of the globe to grow grapes and bottle its fermented nectar in this new region; plenty of home-grown talent is here too. Dan Sullivan of Rosehall Run; Caroline Granger of The Grange of Prince Edward County; Richard Johnson and Vida Zalnieriunas of By Chadsey's Cairn and many others have moved from the big city to live their dream of farming the land, growing grapes and bottling pleasure. They came because

of the “good availability of excellent land (soils) at reasonable prices, compared with say Niagara,” as Webb says. But some, like James Lahti and Victoria Rose, didn't come out to make wine. “We originally bought the property to be a weekend house, a weekend getaway,” says Rose. But somehow, somewhere along the way, the wine bug bit and bit hard. With others, like Caroline Granger, it would seem that the grapes found them: “[We had a] family farm ... we were here before the grapes were.” Eventually they too were bitten.

These pioneers learned one thing about Prince Edward County -- here it's all about the soil. “The whole county is on calcium-based limestone, which is unique to this region and quite distinctive in Ontario,” says Granger. Soil takes on such a mystique in PEC that the County's official winery route map brochure breaks down the region and the wineries by soil type. But in the end, it all comes down to one comparison—and it's on the lips of each winery owner and winemaker: “Best soils outside of Burgundy.”



To make the best Pinot Noir, they come—some with no more than a plot of land and some grapes to grow it on. That's where wineries like Black Prince come in. Black Prince has established itself as a leader in the area, if for no other reason than to help small winemakers who have yet to procure their retail license get their wines into the hands of consumers. For all these dreamers it's all about the Burgundian varieties: Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Pinot Gris and Gamay.

There are a few renegades out there though, like Webb, who believes Cabernet Franc has a future here, and Picard who's convinced he can make a brilliant Merlot. And then there's Richard Johnson, whose vineyard is planted with eight vinifera (European varieties) varieties. "At By Chadsey's Cairn we only have vinifera," he says.

"I think we shouldn't be shy to develop more hybrids. The County is definitely a place for that," says Picard. "I am currently developing a vineyard with 100% hybrids and I

think it is also the future. The potential is huge, especially the new hybrids that we don't have to bury in the winter. I believe in a vineyard made up of 50% hybrids to go into your production." That's quite a radical view, but it seems two wineries have taken this advice to heart, including the first winery to grow grapes in the County.

It all started in 1993, when the Waupoos Winery owners switched from apples to grapes, believing their prime acreage too large to maintain as an apple orchard and too criminal to let it lie fallow or go to seed. Today, they grow a variety of winter-hardy grapes that seem to have taken to the harsh climate: white varieties Vidal, Seyval, Riesling, Chardonnay, Auxerrois and Pinot Gris; and reds Baco Noir, De Chauxnac, Pinot Noir and St. Laurent. And just to prove they like to buck the trend, they yanked out their planting of Heartbreakers. Langlois is also straying from the Pinot Noir path. "We grow Baco Noir with the best success, because it is an early ripener," she says.



DAN SULLIVAN  
ROSEHALL RUN

*W*  
“WE HAVE ENJOYED THE CHALLENGE OF BEING PIONEERS  
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ROBERT GRANGER  
THE GRANGE OF PRINCE  
EDWARD COUNTY

“We are able to create full-bodied red wine every year with great finesse.” Their Reserve Baco is one of the best I’ve ever tried. Catherine says that she “took a bit of heat” for planting Baco, but believes it was well worth it.

Amid all the Burgundian comparison and rah-rah PEC, it’s Picard who brings a voice of reason to the table. “We should stop comparing our region to Burgundy or any other region for that matter,” he says. “We should just talk about Prince Edward County, a region with its own characteristics and qualities. PEC is unique, period.” Picard believes the comparison is premature and raises expectations to an unrealistic level. But he still maintains the goal of making great wine: “Let’s improve our vineyards, our wines, and then we will have the tools to put our products on the world map.”

With the County’s extreme weather conditions, winegrowers have to take some extraordinary measures to protect their vines—especially the vinifera that aren’t used to harsh

temperatures and can be affected by frost or winter damage if the temperature goes below  $-20$  for any length of time, a regular occurrence during the blustery PEC winters. “We at Long Dog were the first to use wine burying as an effective method to combat these conditions,” says Johnson. “However it means that we will always be low production vineyards and we’ll have to continue to try new techniques to maximize heat units during wet and cooler summers.”

What does all this variation in soil types, burying of vines and talk of temperatures mean for winemakers in the County? “We have a variety of soil types and micro-climates here,” says Picard. “As an island, it is amazing to see that sometimes temperatures are five degrees less in two different spots and the composition of soil could be more limestone here, sand or clay there. These conditions make PEC a formidable place for experimentations. For example, if you plant Chardonnay in two different spots – you will get two very different wines.” In the end, it remains



"all about the soil."

To talk to winemakers in Prince Edward County is to speak to people who know all about hard work and challenges, but it's also to talk to people with a passion and love for what they do. That's because PEC is not for the faint of heart, or those who give up easily – those folks are long gone. Those who remain are the heart and soul of Ontario's newest wine region – the ones ready, willing and able to make a difference.

These brave folks gave new life to a region and boldly went where no winemaker has gone before. And from the looks of things, winemaking in Prince Edward County is in very good hands. Dave Bergeron, of Bergeron Estate, sums it up nicely: "I love every minute of it and am even more excited about the future. The road has been more complex and difficult than I would have ever imagined but every day we are learning. Being able to produce quality wines from Canada makes us feel very proud, and hopefully we have helped some other peoples' lives along the way."



LANNY HUFF  
HUFF ESTATES