

Prince Edward County

Ontario's Burgundy?

BY TONY ASPLER • PHOTOS BY MIKE PEDDLESDEN



Ed Neuser's house and vineyard Waupoos

Will the best Ontario Pinot Noir and Chardonnay come from the Bay of Quinte?

Trenton, Belleville. Names that flash by as you fly along that boring highway from Toronto to Montreal. But if you stopped and turned off on route 33 or 62 you'd be heading for Ontario's newest wine region: Prince Edward County that juts out from the Bay of Quinte into Lake Ontario. Empire Loyalist country replete with old stone farm houses and solid brick houses in Picton, Wellington and Bloomfield – a testament to the wealth of nineteenth century farmers who supplied American breweries with their barley.



Jamie Brauer inspecting his young vines at Hillier

Well actually, it's not recognized as a wine region yet. The VQA has still to embrace it but that, given the enthusiasm and commitment of the growers there, it is just a matter of time. So confident is Ed Neuser who has seven acres planted

on his neatly manicured property at Waupoos facing Smith Bay, that he has commissioned an architect to design the winery that he intends to build. Currently the Vidal he planted in 1994 is processed by his friend Klaus Reif at the Reif winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Land suitable for vineyards is still inexpensive in Prince Edward County (in Niagara a prime vineyard already planted to vinifera can sell for up to \$40,000 an acre, unplanted \$10 – \$12,000).

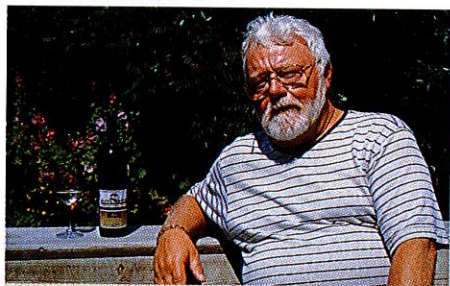
The region is better known for its orchards than its grapes although there used to be a winery in Hillier in the 1870s, whose products were good enough to take a gold medal at the Centennial exposition in Philadelphia. It is in Hillier off the Loyalist Parkway where Jamie Brauer and his colleague Mike Peddlesden propose to plant some 80 acres of vines. Their vineyard land rises from an encircling marsh where deer congregate in the winter to seek warmth – a microclimate that allows their grapes to ripen. During the winter months the county is an average of 7 degrees colder than the Niagara Peninsula which should make the production of Icewine a breeze. Already Brauer and Peddlesden have Riesling, Chardonnay, Baco Noir, Maréchal Foch and Vidal in the ground. What excites the pair is the variety of soils on the property, a mix of sand, clay, limestone and Brighton gravelly clay cobbles.

Geoff Heinrichs, who gave up writing for *Frank* magazine, to settle on a 40-acre farm in the county, has created a test plot of Pinot Noir with 28 different clones from all over the world. Last year he harvested twenty pounds of fruit to make his first wine. Heinrichs has chronicled his pioneering vineyard adventures in the *Ottawa Citizen*. In his introductory article on May 23 this year he wrote: "The question invariably comes up – "Why Prince Edward County?" The quick and easy answer is that its limestone-based soils are probably the best in North America for vitis vinifera...and the climate – though harsher than Niagara – is just barely moderate due to the in-

fluence of Lake Ontario and our many bays. The best of the world's wines come from marginal regions where grapes have to struggle to ripen."

Deborah Paskus is a believer too. She is in partnership with, Bill Lampert, Seaton McLean and Mike Macmillan. Paskus and her life partner Marek Maniecki were planting 10 acres of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay next to a corn field when I found them one blistering hot afternoon in July. With Maniecki, she owns a 40-acre farm on which they plan to plant more vineyards.

Perhaps the most ambitious project has been undertaken by a Toronto-based wine importer, Ian Hanna. He has purchased a 125-acre farm at the south-eastern extremity



Ed Neuser relaxing with a Waupoos Vidal '98

of the island near Waupoos and intends to plant up to 20 acres next April Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Petit Marseng, the grape of Jurançon. He has registered the property name as Prince Edward County Vineyard in case he can't create a winery. The grapes will initially be sold to Southbrook Farms Winery which he helped to establish in 1990.

Currently the grape growers of Prince Edward County are just that. A legal technicality prevents them from making wine commercially in the region. The Alcohol and Gaming Commission will not issue a winery licence unless the vineyard area is in a DVA (designated viticultural area). The VQA regulations,



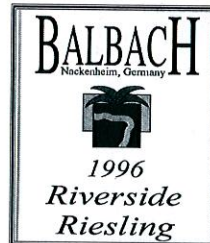
Deborah Paskus takes a break

based hastily on the Australian model, require a DVA have no less than five growers producing at least 500 tonnes of wine grapes on a minimum of 50 acres. "Who in their right minds," asks Hanna, rhetorically, "is going to invest in a vineyard in an area where you may never be able to make wine?"

Ed Neuser has already produced 1200 litres of Vidal in 1998. He also has Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer and Baco Noir. As mentioned, he has his winery plans in place and he has chosen his winemaker, Kyle Baldwin. Neuser came to the county with his wife Rita in 1983, fell in love with it and bought his farm. Five years ago he tore out the apple trees and planted grapes. There is no way he will be denied his winery. And given the dedication of the other pioneers it's unthinkable that Prince Edward County will not become Ontario's fourth designated viticultural area after Niagara Peninsula, Lake Erie North Shore and Pelee Island.

"We're a young area, says Deborah Paskus. "We don't know what's going to happen here - we have our hopes, our anticipation, our research but the proof is going to be in the wines and that's a way's away. 🍷"

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Tony Aspler, Toronto Star, Dec. 30/98

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