What's good and bad about wine in Canada

12 Jan 2007 by FT

If you were invited to a tasting of the crème de la crème of Canadian wine would you a) titter nervously b) snort derisively c) run a mile in the opposite direction or d) accept with curiosity? As an intrepid seeker after new experiences, I of course opted for d) when offered such an opportunity in Toronto last month.

The first wine tasting I ever attended was of Ontario wines, in Canada House in London in 1976. I had just started work on a wine trade publication. It would be fair to say that I was much more impressed by my fellow tasters, important people such as Hugh Johnson and the editor of the fledgling Decanter magazine, than by the wines, but then what did I know then?

I know a bit more now and have been following the progress of Canadian wine with interest ever since. In my experience no nation is more defensive about their own wines than the Canadians, perhaps because they have so little vineyard, less than, say, Slovenia or Japan. Every time I go there to launch a book, usually a reference book about the wines of the world, I am berated for not having devoted more space to the land of maple syrup. I suspect this is partly because Canadians tend to be fed stories which rather overstate Canadian wine's place in the world of wine.

Every time a Canadian wine achieves anything outside Canada, this is made the subject of a major news story and the Canadian wine industry seems to delight in perpetuating similarly flattering propositions. It is popularly believed for instance that one of the favourite activities of China's legion of counterfeiters is nothing to do with Gucci or Louis Vuitton but producing fake versions of Canada's most famous wine, sweet icewine made from frozen grapes that is as crisp as an icicle. And I must have been told at least eight times on my last short visit that the Liquor Control Board of Ontario, the monopoly that retails alcoholic drinks in Canada's most populous province, is the world's largest single buyer of wine. (I don't see how it can be. For example, while the LCBO retails wine to fewer than 13 million people, of all ages, whose average annual wine consumption is 11 litres, the leading British supermarket Tesco has a 25 per cent share of the retail wine market in a country of 60 million people, so effectively supplies 15 million people, whose average annual wine consumption is 22 litres.)

But this is much less important than the wines themselves. I am delighted to report that during three days in Toronto in December, supplemented by a few bottles back here in London, I tasted about 70 wines in all, 17 of which I felt were world class wines from any point of view. One of them, Daniel Lenko's 2002 Syrah from the Niagara Peninsula, was so delicious that I felt it was truly outstanding. The kind people who organised this tasting were Janet Dorozynski, an ex-academic based in Ottawa whose job it is to brief Canadian diplomats on the glories of their own country's wine (a job specification I have never encountered elsewhere) and Zoltan and John Szabo, sommeliers who are related by wine but not by blood, a fact that seemed to me almost as remarkable as that one Igor and no fewer than two (unrelated) Zoltans organised my short visit.

Janet's unusual job must be made all the more difficult by the difficult political issues clouding the image of Canadian wine. For a start, although there are vineyards in Quebec and Nova Scotia, the great majority are in Ontario, mainly between Toronto and the Niagara Falls, and in the completely different cultural and geographical setting of British Columbia's Okanagan Valley in the hinterland of Vancouver almost 2,000 miles to the west. BC so far has only a third as much land under vine as Ontario but about the same number of wineries and produces a quite different, arguably more mainstream style of wine – much more obviously fruity, pungent and New World. Ontarians call it, not exactly neutrally, 'West Coast'.

The majority of the wines I tasted were from Ontario's Niagara Peninsula, recently and surely slightly prematurely carved up into a dozen sub-appellations. If they had a fault it tended to be a lack of concentration. It did seem to me as though the best wines were made by quite a small number of superior producers, among them Canada's highest-profile joint ventures Clos Jordanne (Boisset of Burgundy with the dominant Canadian wine company Vincor, recently acquired by the American Constellation group) and Osoyoos Larose (Vincor with the owners of Bordeaux's Ch Grand Larose) together with some of Canada's best-travelled winemakers. Hopes are pinned on the likes of Charles Baker and Norman Hardie who has made wine all over the place and is developing a new, calcareous wine region in Ontario's Prince Edward County.

Although summers can be really quite hot in Canada's wine regions, winters are long and harsh (hence Canada's status as the world's most prolific producer of icewine) and as if that weren't penance enough, some Canadian vintages have been plagued by, of all things, ladybirds which can taint the resulting wines with a curious sort of raw horseradish or peanut shell aroma. Both 2003 and 2005 vintages were particularly short, which has done nothing to speed Canada's progress towards full truth in labelling and merchandising of wine.

Most of Canada's bigger producers have long bolstered their revenues by selling blends of basic wines imported in bulk and (a small amount of) domestic wine, until recently labelled extremely misleadingly. Today these blends are slightly easier to distinguish from all-Canadian Vintners Quality Alliance (VQA) wines by being labelled, in small letters, 'Cellared in Canada. This bottle contains a mixture of imported and local wine.' I was rather horrified however to see in the LCBO's flagship store in Toronto how many of these blends were displayed on shelves all mixed up with VQA wines under the large banner 'Ontario'. No Canadian I showed these bottles to realised that they contained anything other than Canadian wine.

Now that Canada is producing world class wines, it is surely high time the Canadian wine industry educated Canadians properly about their own wines. How is Canadian wine to establish a reputation if even Canadians are cheated of the chance to taste the difference between it and the rest?

Some superior Canadian wines

Daniel Lenko Syrah 2002 VQA Niagara Peninsula

Sumac Ridge White Meritage 2003 VQA Okanagan Valley

Wild Goose, Mystic River Vineyard Gewurztraminer 2005 VQA Okanagan Valley

Mission Hill Oculus 2004 VQA Okanagan Valley

Le Clos Jordanne, Le Clos Jordanne Vineyard Pinot Noir 2004 VQA Niagara Peninsula

Lailey Vineyards, Canadian Oak Cabernet Franc 2002 VQA Niagara Peninsula

Osoyoos Larose 2004 VQA Okanagan Valley

Henry of Pelham Riesling Icewine 2004 VQA Niagara Peninsula

Tantalus Vineyards, Riesling 2005 VQA Okanagan Valley

Norman Hardie, Chardonnay 2004 VQA Ontario

See also the background - full tasting notes on more than 70 top Canadian wines