

## Canadian wines mature

25 Jan 2013 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is longer

See [Canada's best?](#) for my tasting notes on these wines.

I'm well used to wine being delivered by casually dressed couriers, but one morning last November two substantial men in suits arrived on my doorstep. They looked like Mormon evangelists, or rather the fathers of Mormon evangelists, and they assured me that they too had some wine for me.

'Some' turned out to be seven large cases containing 50 bottles of Canadian wine, delivered by officials from the Canadian High Commission, no less. Because I'm currently updating a book and needed to update my knowledge of Canadian wine, I had 'reached out to', as common parlance now has it, Janet Dorozynski, whose government job in Canada is to advance the cause of Canadian alcoholic drinks. Anyone hosted by a Canadian official at Davos this year, would have had their hooch chosen by Janet. Her task for me was to choose wines she thought would demonstrate the progress Canadian vintners have been making recently.

Like any government official, she could not show geographical favouritism, so the bottles included not only dozens from each of the two major wine-producing provinces, Ontario and British Columbia, but also what she reckoned were the best ferments of Quebec and Nova Scotia. (Actually, having tasted what she sent, I suspect that the very best ferments of Quebec may not be based on grapes at all but on apples - if Leduc-Piedimonte's sweet Ice Cider is anything to judge by.) The French-speaking province is clearly a bit too cold for most European vines but of the three Quebecois examples delivered from the High Commission I was quite impressed by an expensively oaked, mature dry 2008 white from Domaine Les Brome based on the hybrid grape Vidal.

As for the four examples from Nova Scotia, or 'Nouvelle Écosse', I could see strong parallels with English wine (cool Atlantic-influenced climate, high acid). The Gaspereau, Warner's Vineyard 2011 dry Riesling, had more Riesling character than I have ever tasted in my native land. Benjamin Bridge's traditional-method fizz was crisp and sufficiently well made, but I do wonder how financially viable it is to be selling the 2004 vintage only now.

The majority of my favourite wines (listed below with my top choices at the top) had come all the way from British Columbia in western Canada - and I found them in general particularly well and sometimes wittily packaged. Vancouver designers seemed to trump those of Toronto in Ontario. Having not visited wine country in BC and Ontario for some years, I can report that the wines made in both provinces have clearly improved considerably recently.

Overall there were more impressive whites than reds, but - presumably thanks to climate change - reds are no longer pale apologies for wine, even in Ontario where summers tend to be cooler than in BC. (British Columbia's wine country is semi-desert and the reds can be strapping. The only problem is the short growing season and some pretty severe winters.) My three favourite reds were all from BC's spectacular Okanagan Valley, were wittily named, and were very different. Church & State somehow managed to produce a luscious Coyote Bowl 2009 Syrah that tastes stunningly recognisably of the northern Rhône's grape but is not overly marked by the American oak in which it was apparently matured. Laughing Stock Vineyards' Portfolio Bordeaux blend (right), another product of the 2009 summer, is perhaps less unusual in how it tastes, but comes in the cunningly etched bottle shown above. And Joie PTG 2010 was perhaps the single most original wine of the entire shipment, a blend of Gamay and Pinot Noir that emulates Burgundy's Passetoutgrains blend, which has been coming out of the shadows recently, not least because of global warming.

Global warming has been having an impact on Canada's most famous wine style. Earlier this month, after some nail-biting, BC vintners did manage to pick some Icewine, frozen grapes that are pressed to produce sweet wine. But the total volume of Icewine produced continues to fall as temperatures rise overall. For many years, expensive and often tiny bottles of Icewine were Canadian wine producers' pride and joy - something they could reliably produce every year and which, with clever packaging, have proved extremely lucrative in Asian markets in particular. If temperatures continue to rise, however, Icewine may become more of an occasional bonus - as in Germany - rather than spearheading Canada's wine export drive. I must say that I was not especially impressed by the three Icewines included in my recent consignment, although again the French hybrid Vidal seemed at home in eastern Canada and the 2010 Vidal Icewine from specialist Peller of Niagara was perfectly respectable even if not especially rich or complex.

I was seriously impressed, however, by several dry Rieslings, not least those of Tantalus in BC, and by a relatively early Chardonnay offering from the admired Canadian winemaker Thomas Bachelder, who now, ambitiously, makes a Chardonnay in each of Ontario, Oregon and what he perhaps ought to call O'Burgundy to make up a neat set of initials. (It would surely be more convenient for him to choose a southern hemisphere region whose harvest is at a different time of year. Otago perhaps.)

There was a respectable Ontario fizz, and things generally look set fair for Canada's most ambitious wine producers - except that they still have to sell mainly in the liquor stores that generate so much cash for provincial monopolies such as Ontario's LCBO. Here Canada's best wines, designated VQA, are in competition with very much cheaper products that, despite a considerable hullabaloo in 2009, are still labelled confusingly. What would you understand by an 'International Canadian Blend'? This is the term that has succeeded 'Cellared in Canada' for the cheapest products in Canadian wine stores, liquids made up of grape juice, grape concentrate and wine imported from wherever can supply most cheaply - together with a bit of the most basic Canadian wine, typically made from the hybrids not allowed in VQA wines.

Apparently in the trade they are known as ICBs. I'd suggest this might stand for 'in cold blood'. The wine regulators and the Canadian brand owners who bottle these ersatz products may not be committing murder but they certainly seem to me to be deceiving the wine-buying public into thinking that all these concoctions are made from the fermented juice of freshly picked grapes - the definition of 'wine' that is commonly accepted outside Canada.

See [Canada's best?](#) for my tasting notes on all the wines.

## My favourite wines

### WHITES

#### BC

Tantalus, Old Vines Riesling 2008 Okanagan Valley

Tantalus Riesling 2010 Okanagan Valley

Meyer Family Vineyards, Tribute Series - Sonia Gaudet Chardonnay 2010 Okanagan Valley

Pentage, Dirty Dozen Vineyards Roussanne/Marsanne/Viognier 2010 Okanagan Valley

#### Ontario

Bachelder, Wilmer Vineyard Chardonnay 2010 Twenty Mile Bench

Thirty Bench, Steel Post Vineyard Riesling 2010 Beamsville Bench

Charles Baker, Stratus Riesling 2011 Vinemount Ridge

Thirteenth Street, Grande Cuvée Brut Blanc de Noirs 2006 Niagara Peninsula

REDS

**BC**

Church & State, Coyote Bowl Syrah 2009 Okanagan Valley

Laughing Stock Vineyards, Portfolio 2009 Okanagan Valley

Joie, PTG 2010 Okanagan Valley

**Ontario**

Coyote's Run, Red Paw Vineyard Pinot Noir 2009 Four Mile Creek