

It's a prince of a wine region

'THE COUNTY' GROWING IN SIZE AND QUALITY



Photography • Margaret Mulligan

Among the wineries drawing visitors to Prince Edward County are Huff Estates (top photo) and Norman Hardie (bottom photo).

FIVE WINES NOT TO MISS

(All scores out of 5 stars)

Hinterland 2009 Sparkling Rosé (\$37): The best in a short line of wonderful bubbly in the rosé line. The finesse of this wine is attributed to the perfect growing season for the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes that go into the making of it, and also the growing experience of winemaker Jonas Newman. (****1/2+)

Norman Hardie 2010 County Pinot Noir (\$35): If you like the fruit in your Pinot to be big and in your face, yet with well-balanced acidity and a long finish, this is your wine. (****+)

Karlo Estates Ports (\$29 each/500 ml): A red and a white, the first in The County. Even non-Port drinkers find these attractive, mainly due to the unconventional grapes varieties that go into their making. (Red: ****1/2- White: ****+)

Exultet 2010 The Blessed Chardonnay (\$35): For a winemaker that's not a fan of the grape, Gerard Spinosa of Exultet is cranking out some great award-winning Chardonnay. All using new oak, this one's full-flavoured and intense. (****+)

Stanners 2010 Cabernet Franc (\$25): Good example of Franc with plenty of fruit and cigar-box aromas; blackberry, strawberry, vanilla and black pepper on the palate with a long black cherry linger on the finish. (****+)

By Michael Pinkus

ABOUT EIGHT YEARS AGO, I made a wine trek to Prince Edward County and was for the most part disappointed by what I saw and tasted (with little exception).



Michael Pinkus

At that time, there was a handful of wineries dotting the landscape, and the region was being touted as the “next great

wine region/destination of Ontario.” My take-away from this first trip was: too much hype too soon — and I am glad to say my instincts were right on the money.

If you found yourself in the same boat and vowed never to return, I highly recommend you go back on your self-imposed exile. And for those who have never been, you've picked a good time for your first foray into what's called “The County.”

Now boasting more than 30 wineries,

Prince Edward County is now living up to its up-and-coming-region moniker, because it is truly on the cusp of greatness. There are still wineries that need time to find their vinous voice, but there are also a number of well-established and “second-wave” (opened in the last three years) wineries that are showing there is excellent winemaking being done in the eastern part of the province.

The County is recommended as a weekend excursion due to the three-plus-hour drive time. Hotels can be found on the cheap in Belleville and Trenton; more luxurious and pricier/romantic abodes can be found within the county itself. I'll leave the accommodations up to you and your tastes, as your fingers can do the walking over your keyboard to find exactly where you want to stay. Instead, I'll direct you to a few wineries not to be missed along with

some must-try wines you'll want to add to your cellar or sip now.

Prince Edward County made its name by making Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, and while they are still the staple grapes of the region, there are plenty of varying styles to keep you interested. Many wineries are stretching their wings to see what else grows in the ground and makes good wine in the region — and if they can't, they can just go up the road three hours and buy grapes from Niagara.

Your first visit must be to Hinterland Wine Company (in Hillier). This is Ontario's only sparkling wine house and it is making excellent traditional method (champagne-style) wines. It also makes tank, otherwise known as Charmat method, bubbly that remind me of light and easy Italian Prosecco.

There's a trifecta of wineries on Greer

Road in Hillier that is easy to recommend. Here, you can park at one and visit all three because they are within walking distance. However, if you're planning to purchase, you may wish to drive from place to place.

Norman Hardie Winery and Vineyard (1152 Greer Rd.) is known for Pinot Noirs and Chardonnay and Burgundian-style, but you'll also find awesome Loire-style Cabernet Franc, pleasant Pinot Gris and really good Riesling on the tasting menu — all worth sampling.

Rosehall Run Vineyards (1243 Greer Rd.) just opened its new tasting room, which is a far cry from the small space they used above the barrel cellar of yesteryear.

They have a lineup of wines to suit any taste, from red and white blends to single-vineyard varietals, and winemaker Dan Sullivan is always innovating, so you never know what you'll find. ▶

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▶ A new name in an old location is Casa-Dea Estates Winery (1186 Greer Rd.). This winery took over the land and winery that used to be Carmela Estates and has changed the fortunes of this winery for the better. There is a comprehensive lineup of wines from sparklers to Cabernet Franc plus a very pretty winery restaurant overlooking the expansive grounds.

Those looking for wineries with rebel spirits need look no further than Redtail Vineyard and Karlo Estates. Redtail touts itself as Canada's first off-the-grid winery, meaning it is all solar powered.

And speaking of off-the-grid, winemaker Richard Karlo is off the chart, making the county's first Ports (red and white) plus other heavy reds like Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot that one does not immediately identify with the region. He's also growing and making wines from little known grapes like the Frontenac series out of Minnesota.

Over at Exultet Estates, they are making award-winning Chardonnays, which I find funny because it is not winemaker Gerard Spinosa's favourite grape to work with. Instead he prefers his beloved Pinot Noir (which is why I guess his top Pinot is named just that) and he is doing wonders with both grapes.

One of the all-encompassing wineries of the region is Huff Estates Winery. It has a seasonal restaurant, an art gallery and a luxury inn to go along with the award-winning wines.

Winemaker Frédéric Picard is one of the unsung "heroes" of the region and produces consistently good wines year after year, including traditional method sparkling, unconventional rosés, Pinot Gris and Sauvignon Blanc.

And need I mention his love for the Merlot grape and his deft hand at Chardonnay? But what do you expect from a French winemaker?

Do you have a little time left? How about checking out some of the little guys in the area: Devil's Wishbone Winery is worth it for the name alone. Lighthall Vineyards makes wines that are starting to show some real promise.

And there's Stanners Vineyard, whose 2010 Cabernet Franc is outstanding and who sold out very quickly of one of the more uniquely styled Pinot Gris I've tasted. Let's hope they can replicate that next vintage so more of us can get a bottle.

I've mentioned just a handful of the possible places to try in The County — there are at least another dozen you could wander into or just bump into if you drive along the highways and bi-ways.

With the pretty scenery and the fall colours on the way, now's the time to start re-thinking your ways and plan a trip that'll open your eyes to Ontario's emerging other region — this time the hype isn't as much, but it would be well deserved. 🍷



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