

# Falling for NIAGARA

With stunning natural beauty the Niagara region is worth a visit at any time of year. Michael Raffael discovers an emerging wine-industry and meets passionate foodies that make the place unmissable

Photography by Andreas Trauttmansdorff



MAIN PICTURE: CHELTON BEACH WITH CONFEDERATION BRIDGE BEHIND. LEFT: COLEVILLE BAY OYSTERS; AND SORTING THROUGH THE DAY'S CATCH AT SALUTATION COVE

OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:  
PRINCE EDWARD DISTILLERY; CHILLI  
MUSSELS AT FLEX MUSSELS; GRADED  
LOBSTERS; SUNBATHING SEALS;  
FISH AND CHIPS IN GEORGETOWN;  
A LIGHTHOUSE IN VICTORIA. THIS PAGE  
FROM FAR LEFT: CHEF GORDON

Nicolette Novak likes the 2009 Cabernet Franc rosé she has just released. She sold a case to a customer at her Good Earth winery on the strength of the name she was thinking of christening it: 'Panty Remover'. The retort came back 'I'll email you and let you know whether it worked.'

Niagara is a young wine region, not quite sure how to treat itself. One moment it's serious, intensely proud of its world-famous ice wines. The next it's arch and self-deprecating. Any vineyard naming its estates No. 99, after an ice hockey shirt, must have a quirky side even though the owner is Canada's national hero Wayne Gretzky.

Skip back a few years; the Ontario county favoured fruit farming. Peach, cherry and apricot orchards blanketed the flat countryside. There were grapes too, but as one retired farmer put it: 'Canadian wine was something you drank to get drunk if you couldn't afford whisky.'

What has changed is the switch from quantity to quality. When the man from Del Monte said 'No', closing the last Niagaran canning plant in 2008, he signalled the end of an era. Cheap mono-crops, harvested under-ripe were history. Criss-cross the grid of lanes off the Queen Elizabeth Highway in summer; roadside farmers' markets are now selling the freshest golden raspberries, blueberries and strawberries. In the fall, trellised rows of vines hang heavy with Vidal, Riesling and Cabernet Franc grapes.

Say 'Niagara' and the next word to come to mind is 'Falls'. A

geological hiccup on the eponymous river, it has a unique whoosh factor. Everyone should visit it once. On the map, it's a mere pimple on the brow of a peninsula separating two Great Lakes, Eerie and Ontario. Between them lies a landscape that can veer from Napa Valley to Lapland with every rustic shade in between.

One of the new breed farmers, Nicolette inherited 55 acres in Twenty Valley from her parents. 'Kiwi' Ross, her wine-maker, is a New Zealander. She runs an al-fresco cookery school under a giant parasol. Her Patio restaurant piles 'Tartine sandwiches' of sourdough bread with salad greens from her vegetable patch and Pingue prosciutto from a local curer.

'We have to remember we're farmers,' she says. It's a theme that Paul Pender the winemaker at nearby Tawse Winery endorses, adding: 'We're not a factory. If you do your work in the vineyard and respect the fruit, the terroir speaks loud and clear.' The estate meanders down the slopes of the Niagara Escarpment, a ridge that straggles across the region to the Falls. Locals call it The Bench.

Run on biodynamic lines Tawse really does operate like a farm. Hens range between rows of vines providing their own brand of fertilizer. Ducks eat the flies. Pender uses horse-drawn ploughs, and sheep: 'We keep them to eat the vine leaves and in the fall we sell them to restaurants.'

Like so many vineyards and wineries, Tawse is less than ten



## Travel INFORMATION

### Resources

**Ontario Travel** ([ontariotravel.net/uk](http://ontariotravel.net/uk)). For detailed information on the province including the Niagara region. Find all you need to know about wine trails, best restaurants and lovely places to stay.

**Wines of Ontario** ([winesofontario.org](http://winesofontario.org)). A handy reference for discovering the wineries of Niagara-on-the-Lake.

### Further reading

*Simply in Season – 12 Months of Wine Country Cooking* by

Tony de Luca (Whitecap, £27). This cookbook is a joyous celebration by the Niagara chef of the province's bountiful produce and wines.

### Don't Miss

**Good Earth** 4566 Lincoln Avenue, Beamsville (00 1 905 563 9143; [goodearthfoodandwine.com](http://goodearthfoodandwine.com)). This unique cookery school/winery/restaurant is a fun place to go and will leave you feeling 10 years younger. Lovely people. Fresh, tasty food and reasonably priced wine.





OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: PRINCE EDWARD DISTILLERY; CHILLI MUSSELS AT FLEX MUSSELS; GRADED LOBSTERS; SUNBATHING SEALS; FISH AND CHIPS IN GEORGETOWN; A LIGHTHOUSE IN VICTORIA. THIS PAGE FROM FAR LEFT: CHEF GORDON BAILEY, OWNER OF LOT 30; DISHES AT FORTUNE'S BAY IN; JOHNNY FLYNN OF COLVILLE BAY

At Inniskillin, charts on the winery wall show that it's on the same latitude as Burgundy, Alsace and the Rhein. Its claim to fame is that it tamed the bitter Canadian winters to produce pioneering icewines

years old. Back then Pender was working as a carpenter. Now, his brief is to create a Pinot Noir that will compete with fine Burgundy.

By training Anna Olson is a baker. On Food Network Canada, she combines Delia's precision with a younger Nigella's figure. At her favourite organic farm shop Inn The Pines she outlines how the region divides into smaller pockets: 'There are lots of little micro regions. You've got the Beamsville Bench where wines have a special character, and Vinelands – they're more into tender fruits. Then you have the Lakeside road and a beautiful community called Port Dalhousie. Then, all of a sudden you cross the Welland Canal and you're at Niagara-on-the-Lake and all its flat plains.'

Husband Michael was chef at Inn on Twenty in Jordan Village and remembers that a generation ago the only vegetables he could source locally were zucchini and tomatoes. Today market gardens grow heirloom varieties, new season garlic and sunburst squashes.

Changes may be happening fast, but unless you knew it was there,

you might drive right past Treadwell Farm To Table Cuisine in Port Dalhousie. Set back from the road it overlooks a lock of the Welland Canal. Father Steve cooks while son, James, doubles as sommelier and head-waiter. Between them, they hunt down little-known treasures. Tiny roasted beets, gold, purple and variegated, painted with a hazelnut vinaigrette, are sprinkled with crumbs of sheep's milk feta. Locally caught white fleshed pickerel is served seared.

Niagara-on-the-Lake is 'bijou', no other word for it. From the manicured flower-beds in its main street, to the pastel-painted clapboard houses with Dutch-barn roofs it exudes an air of discreet wealth. Shops reflect the quaintness of the place. Touristy? you bet, but Greaves, the jam shop has been boiling its preserves since the 1920s. Kurtz Culinary Creations bottles grape curds, wine jellies and a welter of dips, pickles and chutneys. Cones of Cow's ice cream, 'Goopy Mooey', 'Wowie Cowie' and 'Moo Crunch', belie their gawky names. They are expensive too. The third most popular seller at Cheese Secrets may be imported from Ilchester in Somerset. Its top two are both produced locally by the Upper Canada Cheese Company a few miles away at Jordan Station.

Niagara Gold, a semi-soft, washed rind cheese is modelled on the Québécois Oka, made by Trappist monks. The dairy had to work hard to obtain a license to use milk from a single Guernsey herd. Canadian regulations, many devised before the revival of artisan products, can be a tad fussy. The other mould ripened Comfort Cream matures to a rich goopy texture like Sharpam's brie.

At Inniskillin, just outside Niagara-on-the-Lake, charts on the winery wall show that it's on the same latitude as Burgundy, Alsace and the Rhein. That's why, it says, the region makes cold-climate wines. Its unchallenged claim to fame is that it tamed the bitter Canadian winters to produce pioneering icewines.

The *Eiswein* process originated in Germany. Grapes remain on the vine deep into mid-winter. Once the temperature drops below zero, water in them freezes, but not the sugars. Harvest takes place between December and March when the outside air falls to -9° (sometimes as low as -17°). During pressing, much of the grape must stays frozen and is lost, but the winemaker salvages a concentrated essence of sweet juice that he ferments. A well-made icewine balances the sugar and acidity of ripe, healthy grapes. It's deliciously sweet but never cloying.

Partners Karl Kaiser and Donald Ziraldo launched their first icewine in 1984. Their success opened, figuratively speaking, the lock gates that made possible a revolution. Back then Vidal were the grape variety of choice. They still are, but Riesling and Cabernet Franc are gaining ground. Chic wineries like neighbouring, Stratus, is experimenting with assemblages of Riesling and Semillon.

## WHERE TO STAY

Prices quoted are for a double room based on two sharing.

**The Charles Inn** 209 Queen Street, Niagara-on-the-Lake (00 1 905 468 4588; charlesinn.ca). Country-house style, next door to the Golf Club. Carefully prepared classic French cuisine. From £236.

**Greenview Bed & Breakfast** 116 Simcoe Street, Niagara-on-the-Lake (00 1 905 704 8619; greenviewbandb.com). Luxurious self-contained suite and you have breakfast at the golf club over the road. From £190.

**Harbour House Hotel** 85 Melville Street, Niagara-on-the-Lake (00 1 905 468 4683; harbourhousehotel.ca). Luxurious Boutique Hotel on the lakefront facing the Marina. Friendly helpful staff. From £252.

**Prince of Wales** 6 Picton Street, Niagara-on-the-Lake (00 1 905 468 3246; vintage-hotels.com). Revamped version of a grand hotel in the colonial style. From £252.

**Shaw Club Hotel and Zees Grill** 92 Picton Street, Niagara-on-the-Lake (00 1 905 468 5715; shawclub.ca). Modern boutique hotel and spa with a busy grill room opposite the Shaw Theatre. From £275.





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EDWARD  
DISTILLERY; CHILLI  
MUSSELS AT FLEX  
MUSSELS; GRADED



## WHERE TO SHOP

When Her Majesty visited Ottawa, she sipped Stratus's blended 'Red' at a royal banquet. Our guide explains the ecologically friendly design, geothermal heating allied to a gravity-flow system that turns grapes into wine in a way reminiscent of how millers used to convert wheat into flour.

At Peller Estates, wining and dining pull together. A glass of icewine matches chicken liver parfait with an icewine crust. A posh take on *poutine* (chips and gravy to the uninitiated) with duck breast arrives with a glass of Private Reserve Merlot and a flight of three blue cheeses, one, like port in stilton, impregnated with wine tests the diner's ability to interact with his or her dinner.

Tour the Niagara Peninsula; chances are you'll only meet up with VQA wines. The acronym on labels, standing for Vintners Quality Alliance guarantees that only Canadian grapes have gone into the making. It sets a clear distinction from 'Cellared in Canada'. A throwback to the past, bottles labelled like this can contain imported bulk product.

The amazing thing is that everything is evolving so fast. Ed DeMarco retired from a blue-collar job with General Motors in St Catharines. Now he has 40 Mennonite pickers harvesting blueberries on his farm. Drive along Locust Lane on the Beamsville Bench; three, maybe four of the wineries weren't there five years ago. Nicolette probably won't call her rosé Panty Remover; she will go on making better and better wine. □

## WHERE TO EAT

Prices are based in a three-course meal per person without wine.

**De Luca's Wine Country Restaurant** 111C Garrison Village Drive, Niagara-on-the-Lake (00 1 905 468 7900; tonydeluca.ca). Anna Olson's recommendation. Opposite Stratus winery. Fresh California-style cuisine. From £34.

**Inn on the Twenty Jordan Village** 3845 Main Street, Jordan, Niagara-on-the-Lake (00 1 800 701 8074; innonthetwenty.com). Generous helpings high on calories but always tasty. From £33.

**Treadwell Farm to Table Cuisine** 61 Lakeport Road, Port Dalhousie (00 1 905 934 9797; treadwellcuisine.com). Interesting, individualistic cooking with excellent raw materials and great wines. There's a lively brasserie too. From £49.

**Peller Estates Winery Restaurant** 290 John Street East, Niagara-on-the-Lake (00 1 905 468 4678; peller.com). Cooking of Michelin-star standard designed to match Peller's premium wines. From £54.

**Cheese Secrets** 38 Market Street, Niagara-on-the-Lake (00 1 905 468 2555; cheesesecrets.com). The Canadian cheeses are carefully sourced, including a five-year-old Cheddar and some local Niagara Gold.

**Greaves Jams** 55 Queen Street, Niagara-on-the-Lake (00 1 905 468 3608). Open since the 1920s and still making jams to the same recipes.

**Inn the Pines farmers' market** 1320 Seventh Street, Louth, St Catharines (00 1 905 353 5887; innthepinesonline.com). All the seasonal organic fruit and vegetables – some like yellow or black raspberries are unfamiliar in the UK.

**Kurtz Culinary Creations** 38-40 Queen Street, Niagara-on-the-Lake (00 1 905 468 3815). All kinds of locally inspired pickles, chutneys and relishes.

**Kurtz Orchards** 16006 Niagara Parkway, Niagara-on-the-Lake (00 1 905 468 2937; kurtzorchards.com). Farm shop in the English style with cakes, snacks and delicatessen goodies.

**Inniskillin Winery** Line 3 & Niagara Parkway, Niagara-on-the-Lake (00 1 905 468 3554; inniskillin.com). Heavyweight pioneering winery famous for icewine, but its other offerings, especially the Riesling are good too.

**Stratus Vineyards** 2059 Niagara Stone Road, Niagara-on-the-Lake (00 1 905 468 1806; stratuswines.com). Serious and very ambitious winery. It's red is a *vin de garde* that ought to be several years old before you drink it. White, carefully blended is complex and delicious.

**Tawse Winery** 3955 Cherry Avenue, RR#1, Vineland (00 1 905-562-9500; tawsewinery.ca). Biodynamic winery that's up with the region's big hitters. The style of whites differs from wineries near the lake, but the Pinot Noir is a star of the future.



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