

March 12, 2008

## Canadian bubbly has a sparkling future

By Beppi Crosariol

From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

Canadian wines seem to be landing with ever-greater fanfare these days. Osoyoos Larose, the Vincor joint venture with France's Groupe Taillan recently brought the halo of Bordeaux to British Columbia's Okanagan Valley with an elegant red immodestly called Le Grand Vin. Another Vincor-led project, Le Clos Jordanne, tapped the Burgundy pedigree of producer Boisset to make a range of acclaimed pinot noirs in Niagara. Its top selection goes by the hyperbolic name Le Grand Clos.

Neither of those grand efforts, though, carries the burden of international scrutiny that will undoubtedly greet a new wine being bottled this week by the Okanagan's Sumac Ridge Estate Winery.

The wine's name: Olympic Cuvée, which plays off its planned release in 2010.

Other wines will carry the Games logo, of course, but this will be Vincor's flag-bearer, a new sparkling wine crafted to be popped during the world party celebrations. Exuberant athletes will toast with it, tourists will lug it home as souvenirs and visiting reporters, thirsty for offbeat "lifestyle" vignettes between scintillating curling bonspiels, will undoubtedly seize on the novelty of "Arctic Champagne."

I, for one, am thrilled. I've long considered sparkling wine to be Canada's ticket into the dry wine export club, a compelling second act after the duty-free success of sweet icewine.

The reason has to do with optics. Most wine aficionados know it takes brisk weather to get high natural acidity out of sparkling wine's best grape varieties, chardonnay and pinot noir, and the whole world knows frigid weather is our most abundant natural resource. In marketing parlance, it's called playing to your strengths.

It also helps that Canadian sparkling wine - the premium stuff made in the method pioneered by France's northern Champagne region - is consistently excellent.

"I can't tell you how refreshing it is to hear you say this," said Gary Pickering, a researcher with Brock University's Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute in St. Catharines, Ont.

"To me it's been obvious for a long time that the climate, the terroir, the naturally high acids - we have everything for what should be a premium sparkling wine-producing region."

Dr. Pickering says many of our best Canadian sparklers, at roughly half the cost of comparable \$50-plus French Champagnes, are a bargain.

As for why more Canadian producers aren't making bubbly, he offered this partial explanation: production costs. So-called traditional-method sparkling wine is labour-intensive.

After making the still base wine, producers must leave it to referment and mature in heavy-glass Champagne bottles like the 84,000 now rolling off the Sumac Ridge line.

Into the bottles goes a dose of live yeast, which feeds off added sugar, slowly giving off carbon dioxide.

It's those natural CO<sub>2</sub> bubbles, trapped under pressure in sealed bottles, and the yeasty flavours that distinguish fine sparkling wine from its industrially carbonated analogues such as soda pop.

Dr. Pickering makes a point of not publicly naming favourites, so as to maintain his academic distance. So let me offer mine, all of which are made in limited quantities and rarely available beyond their home province.

Sumac Ridge, founded by the granddaddy of B.C. wine, Harry McWatters, and distinguished by the winemaking talents of Mark Wendenburg, is a clear leader. Its current lineup consists of two whites, the ever-popular \$25 Steller's Jay Brut and the worth-every-penny \$35 Pinnacle, a vintage-dated wine that spends years maturing in cellar. Just 500 cases of the latter were produced in 2001, the currently available vintage. Sumac also makes a Sparkling Shiraz, a \$30 red inspired by a love-it-or-hate-it style popular in Australia. Warning: It's for acquired tastes - leaner and more arid than most Aussie versions.

Sumac's sister winery, See Ya Later Ranch, could rest its reputation solely on its bubbly, a small-production gem that's currently sold out called SYL Brut (around \$23). Winemaker Dave Carson had the fine idea to add about 5-per-cent Riesling to the chardonnay for added crispness and a more complex aroma.

Sparkling wine is the specialty at British Columbia's Summerhill Pyramid Winery and the passion is evident in its acclaimed flagship, Cipes Brut (\$25), one of four bubbly in its lineup. Gray Monk, also in British Columbia, makes an excellent pink version, mainly from the gamay grape of Beaujolais, Gray Monk Odyssey Rosé Brut (\$27).

In Ontario, look for Henry of Pelham Cuvée Catharine Brut (\$30), Jackson-Triggs Proprietors' Grand Reserve Méthode Classique (\$25) and Château des Charmes Méthode Traditionnelle Brut (\$22.75) among others.

The Okanagan Valley in particular has a leg up on Champagne and other regions where quality bubbly is produced. It is exceedingly sunny and dry. That means a full and consistent ripening year-to-year, which yields richer fruit flavours. It also means a virtual absence of rot in the vineyards, a marked contrast with Champagne, where a fungus known as *Peronospera viticola*, or downy mildew, can contribute off-flavours if vineyards aren't regularly treated with copper sulfate.

"Our area is just a natural for making sparkling wine," said Sumac's Mr. Wendenburg, who produced his first, experimental B.C. sparkling wine in conjunction with California producer Schramsberg in the late 1980s.

Most quality Canadian sparkling wines are made mainly either from pinot noir or chardonnay or blended from both, often with some pinot meunier thrown in. In Champagne, no other grapes are allowed. But unbound by French law, Canadians are free to experiment, often adding complementary grapes such as pinot blanc and riesling for extra zip and complexity. The Olympic Cuvée is a blend of mostly chardonnay with some pinot blanc, for example.

Sparkling wine may seem like an ironic strong suit for an industry still occasionally haunted by its Baby Duck and Spumante Bambino past, a time when sweet, industrially carbonated "pop wines" made from untamed, blunt-tasting native North American grape varieties ruled the liquor store wine category.

But sometimes it takes a leap to find your true calling. Consider England. Over the past two years, the cloud-covered country has garnered a slew of international headlines for a handful of decent (but in my opinion overpriced) sparkling wines, such as Nyetimber, Ridgeview and Chapel Down.

In a San Francisco Chronicle feature last November titled *The Bubbly Issue: A Field Guide to Sparklers from Around the World*, the tiny English industry figured prominently beside Italy, Germany, Austria and even, believe it or not, Russia. Canada? It wasn't even mentioned.

I hope a thirsty Chronicle reporter visiting Vancouver in 2010 finds his or her way to a flute of Sumac Ridge Olympic Cuvée. I'm sure it will be flowing when our curlers capture the gold medal.

### **Tasting notes**

Summerhill Pyramid Winery Cipes Brut, *B.C.*, \$25A rare organic bubbly with no sulfites added. Ripe, forward flavours of peach, apple and lemon underpinned by a subtle toasted-bread character. Excellent.

Gray Monk Odyssey Rosé Brut, *B.C.*, \$27Pure berry fruit up front, with a fine and lively mousse and zesty acidity. Sexy pink colour.

Sumac Ridge Pinnacle 2001, *B.C.*, \$35Reminiscent of a super-

premium vintage Champagne, with a core of candied orange and green apple, and a whisky-like, mineral-accented finish. Impressive.

Château des Charmes

Méthode Traditionelle Brut, *Niagara*, \$22.75Supercrisp and citrusy, with an overtone of minerals and firm, balanced structure.

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