

Ontario wine industry needs to find itself

Posted by Monique Beech
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The Ontario wine industry has to create an identity and understand what sets it apart from the rest of the world if it wants to succeed, says a Brock University business professor.

Every major wine region in the world has a strong sense of self, said Maxim Voronov, an associate fellow with Brock's Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute.

When people think of France, they think of sophistication and maybe snobbery, he said. Australia conjures images of playfulness, he said.

"(Identity) is something people don't talk about (in Ontario)," Voronov said.

"When wineries try to convince consumers to switch over from their preferred wine regions to Ontario, they have to explain to them not only are our wines as good ... but we need to explain to them what's different about our wines. Every established wine region seems to have some kind of established identity."

Understanding what gives wines their "specialness and distinctiveness" has been the focus of Voronov's research for three years.

Working with his business faculty colleague Dirk De Clercq, a fellow at Brock's wine institute, Voronov set out to try and gauge how well wineries are creating "symbolic value," a blend of artistic winemaking techniques, a good story and ability to sell themselves.

The idea behind the pair's study is to help wineries sell premium wine. Just making it isn't enough. Wineries have to sell their story.

That's important to the Ontario wine industry, which needs to focus on premium wines if it wants to stay competitive. The region's unstable climate and relatively high cost of growing grapes, a flood of lower-cost wines into the market and increased consumer demand for upper-tier wines are all reasons for going upscale.

As part of their study, the duo partnered with several local wineries of different sizes and interviewed many other industry stakeholders, including wine writers, restaurateurs and LCBO executives.

They tried to learn how the wineries coped with different challenges, ranging from business

to climate.

The pair came up with two key conclusions:

-- Wineries need to follow "artistic rationality," or attempt to produce wines of critical acclaim, and foster ties with wine writers, bloggers and restaurateurs to get their name out.

-- Ontario wineries should try to imitate Old World wine regions, which fit better with the province's geography and climate conditions.

Voronov is hoping to share his report with all stakeholders in the Ontario wine industry.

To get a copy of the report, e-mail Voronov at mvoronov@brocku.ca.