

Measuring Up

Taking stock of Prince Edward County

BY CHRISTOPHER WATERS

The second annual Judgement of Kingston tasting recently offered wine lovers the chance to compare a range of Pinot Noirs, from nearby Prince Edward County and from the Burgundy region of France, to see which reigned supreme.

A capacity crowd of 250 consumers and a selected panel of six experts were on hand to taste the wines on November 3 at Residence Inn. I joined Canadian sommelier Véronique Rivest and wine writers Jamie Goode and Carolyn Evans Hammond as the professional judges.

No one knew the identity of the wines except the organizers, who selected the pouring order for the four County and three Burgundy selections.

Tasters were asked to rank the wines and identify whether each came from the County or from Burgundy. It wasn't easy. The experts were often divided on the origin of the wines—a decided win for emerging producers in the County, given that they were squaring off against wineries from the re-

gion that made Pinot Noir world-famous.

Interestingly, we each had different criteria for what gave Pinot Noir a County context or a Burgundy background. Bright acidity was a common trait associated with the cool-climate County region. But quality factors, such as the ripeness of fruit, influence of oak barrels and harmony, were more evenly distributed between the two competing regions.

From the beginning, County winemakers have had visions of Burgundy dancing in their heads because of the growing conditions that encouraged them to embrace Chardonnay and Pinot Noir as their staple grape varieties.

Early champions such as Geoff Heinricks and Deborah Paskus planted experimental vineyards and coaxed compelling wines from the limestone-rich soils that brought the modern industry to life.

Today, Prince Edward County represents less than one per cent of the wine produced in the province. But the value of those wines

helps Ontario wine stand out on the international stage.

Producers such as Norman Hardie, Closson Chase and Stanners are receiving accolades from writers and sommeliers working around the country and across the globe. Wine bibles like *Wine Spectator*, *Decanter* and *The World of Fine Wine* have sung the praises of this nascent region that's right on the fringe of viable grape growing.

On this day in November, Burgundy took top honours, placing first and second on the experts' scorecard and in the popular vote.

Domaine Drouhin-Laroze 2012 Gevrey-Chambertin ranked first with the head table, with Domaine Thenard 2011 Givry Cellerier aux Moines being the runner-up. Stanners Vineyard 2014 Barrel Select Pinot Noir placed third—our top-scoring County selection. These wines were selected long ago and sadly are no longer available for purchase.

Organized by The Royal Winers—a Kingston-based tasting group of Royal Military



**Norman Hardie
Winery and Vineyard
2016 County Pinot
Noir**
PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY
\$45

The newly released 2016 vintage represents the biggest volume and best County Pinot Noir to date from superstar winemaker Norman Hardie. This is an elegant and juicy expression that shows the ripeness of the vintage without losing its enjoyable bright and refreshing character.



**Rosehall Run
Vineyards 2016
Hungry Point Pinot
Noir**
PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY
\$24.95

Hungry Point is Rosehall's new small-lot wine label. This is an enjoyably expressive and complex Pinot Noir that makes the most of its earthy and cranberry/cherry flavours. It's dry and refreshing, which makes it more of a food wine for many consumers. Enjoy with the classic Pinot pairings, baked salmon or roast duck.



**Stanners Vineyard
2015 Pinot Noir**
PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY
\$35
(490359)

Stanners' estate vineyard in Hillier saw greatly reduced yields in 2015 due to a late spring frost. The lighter colour and powerful fragrance show classic County character, while the exotic flavours and pitch-perfect balance between the core of fruit, acidity and fine-grained tannins make this truly impressive.

College faculty members, operating since 1992 – the Judgement of Kingston is modelled after the so-called Judgement of Paris tasting in 1976, which helped cement the quality reputation of California wine.

The May 24, 1976, tasting featured Chardonnays from Burgundy and Cabernet-based blends from Bordeaux competing against select bottles from California. The French experts ranked wines from California first in both categories, namely Chateau Montelena 1973 Chardonnay and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars 1973 S.L.V. Cabernet Sauvignon.

Today, people are still talking about how a band of upstart wineries from California bested the efforts of some of the bluest of blue-chip producers from France in a head-to-head tasting. The event went on to inspire a 2008 film – *Bottle Shock* – and changed the face of wine as we know it.

Chateau Montelena winemaker Bo Barrett recalled what the Napa Valley was like when his father bought a dilapidated winery there in 1972. "Napa was a pretty sleepy place," Barrett explained at a dinner to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Paris tasting.


"We started making these really high-quality wines that were well-accepted in San Francisco and Los Angeles and the West Coast. We start winning awards in wine competitions up and down the coast. We were having no problem selling our wine in California. The rest of the country was another story."

The success in Paris helped propel the emerging California wine industry onto the national and international stage, Barrett said. That's why emerging regions love to duplicate the model in the hopes of proving their mettle.

From 2004 to 2014, winemaker Eduardo Chadwick staged annual tastings of his Chilean wines across the greatest French, Italian and Californian producers in major urban markets, such as Berlin, Toronto and Shanghai. He said it was designed to have the world's top wine critics take his country's wine seriously.

Likewise, the Royal Winers are hoping to draw more attention to the premium wines produced in the County.

The inaugural Judgement of Kingston tasting, in 2016, featured select County Chardonnays competing against award-winning bottles from California, with Rosehall Run and Closson Chase coming out on top.

In 2018, the focus will return to Chardonnay, with County selections being tasted alongside notable producers from the Okanagan Valley, on November 3, 3-6:30 p.m. For tickets and information see judgementofkingston.ca. 

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