

Tony Aspler: Insight

I have been following and recording the advancement of the Ontario wine industry for 37 years now. When I started writing about wine in 1975 there were 10 wineries in Ontario. The only one that is still here under its original name is Inniskillin. Today there are 170 operating wineries, including fruit wineries in the province. And more are coming. The improvement in quality and style over that time has been nothing short of heroic. If any other manufacturing industry in the country had shown this kind of dynamic development and innovation it would be hailed and celebrated by our politicians – who would then take credit for it.

We are entering the Golden Age of Ontario wines but we cannot rest on our vine leaves. Competition for the consumer's dollar is getting fiercer and fiercer. What are we doing right and what are we doing wrong in trying to increase our share of the local market and go global?

Let's get the negative stuff out of the way first of all. What are we doing wrong as a wine industry?

First of all, we're making too many wines. We have to ask ourselves **who** are we and **what** do we do best? How do we define ourselves as a wine region?

Right now we tell people we are not British Columbia, and certainly not California. We are flattered when people compare us to Burgundy and Bordeaux but we say we are neither – we're Ontario. But what is the Ontario style, what is the taste that distinguishes us from other wine regions?

In order to conceive of an Ontario style we have to link the product to the land. In other words, we have to make terroir-driven wines. Wines that speak to the soil

in which they were grown. The creation of sub-appellations in Niagara is a start but a real job is to make sure that the right grapes are in the right ground.

On the subject of sub-appellations, I think their introduction was a little premature. Many consumers are still struggling to understand the concept of VQA let alone the complexities of soil and climate variation from the plain to the Bench. And Prince Edward County is a whole different ballgame.

And that leads me to ICBs – International Canadian Blends. What self-respecting wine region would admit that 73 per cent of the products they bottle are blended with off-shore wine? I have heard all the arguments and rationales as to why it is necessary to compete with subsidized wines from the rest of the world but it doesn't wash. I know I'm not going to make any friends in some quarters when I say these off-shore blends are a slap in the face to those Ontario winemakers who labour in their own vineyards to coax fine wines from their own terroir vintage after vintage.

In a typically Canadian way we, as an industry, are trying to be all things to all consumers. By that I mean, we are trying to supply the market from Aligoté to Zweigelt and every variety in between. We have to play to our strengths. We make damn good Riesling, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and certain red blends.

Why try to make Sauvignon Blanc when the Loire Valley, Pays d'Oc and New Zealand do it so much better? And Chile does it cheaper. Why offer varietal Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot when we can only ripen these varietals three times a decade. If we want to produce red wines then we have to make blends as they do in Bordeaux because Cabernet Sauvignon by itself just doesn't cut it in that climate. And what in God's name are we doing trying to make Syrah?

Ask yourselves how many wines does Bordeaux make? How many wines does Burgundy or Alsace make? Or Tuscany or Piemonte? Over generations these regions have determined what grows best in their soil and they concentrate on that. Given international competition we can't wait 200 years to see if Syrah is the right grape for Niagara. We have to take advantage of the experience of other regions and use the site technology available to use to determine the hot spots in our geography.

Sparkling wine is one of our strengths thanks to the acidity in our grapes – play to it. That market is showing tremendous growth. We also make really good rosé in Ontario. We could be the Marsannay of the New World if producers took this category more seriously. And please don't tell me there's no market for rosé. According to the International Wine & Spirit Research project undertaken for Vinexpo Rosé wines are booming ...

The consumption of rosé wines in Canada shot up 38.24% between 2007 and 2011, and the study forecasts even greater growth of 45.41% between 2013 and 2016. Admittedly this is from a small base but these growth numbers are impressive.

According to the same research Canada will become the 5th fastest growing wine market worldwide – behind China, the United States, Russian and Germany. Growth in Canadian wine consumption is three times faster than at the world level. Between 2007 and 2011, Canadian wine consumption increased by 14.55% and this meant the liquor control boards and Alberta moved over 43 million 9-liter cases.

The VINEXPO market study predicts this growth will continue at the same pace between 2013 and 2016 and is forecast to reach 14.27%. This is an average annual increase of 3%, three times that of overall world wine consumption. So Canadians are drinking more wine. Are you ready? If not how should you prepare to meet off-shore competition?

First off, have a look at your labels. Are they as boring to you as they are to the consumer? Apart from a few exceptions, Ontario wine labels lack grabability – that moment in a consumer’s quest for a bottle of wine when they scan LCBO shelves and reach for a bottle. You might say what’s **in** the bottle is more important than what’s **on** the bottle. But if you can’t get the consumer to reach for your wine they’ll never know how good it tastes.

Now let me talk a bit about Icewine. Unfortunately, Icewine has become our calling card around the world. I say *unfortunately* because you can’t build a wine industry on Icewine. When China’s vineyards that have been planted expressly to produce Icewine come on stream they will be able to swamp the international market with inexpensive Icewine and undercut our retail price significantly.

I probably don’t have to tell you that three out of every four bottles of wine purchased by Canadians are imported. In today’s global economy where information about wines is there for a key stroke how do you get attention of the consumer and say ‘look at me.’?

I’m going to reduce that thought to three words: Attract...Connect...Inform.

Attract: Wine country has to be a magnet for consumers. There is an iron-clad rule: **Wine Always Tastes Better in The Presence Of The Winemaker.** Or if it doesn't, you're in trouble. A logical extension of this premise is that wine will always taste better where it is made and presented by a knowledgeable employee in the tasting room. But first you have to get people down to Niagara, Lake Erie North Shore and Prince Edward County to experience the wines where they are grown. Paradoxically, in order to do this you have to offer them something else other than wine. There has to be another reason for them to drive down to wine country. Once they have toured your winery, they're not going to do it a second time. There has to be another reason for them to visit you. Some wineries have cottoned on to this: The concerts mounted by Hillebrand/Trius and Jackson-Triggs for example. Bike tours of wineries, the Shaw Festival, the Icewine Festival, the Twenty Valley Half Marathon, Days of Wine & Chocolate – events like these draw people down. But you need events like these in shoulder seasons.

How about an annual murder mystery novel convention, or an Iron Man competition? There are weddings at wineries and this creates a lifelong loyalty to that brand because of the memories that wedding days evoke. So how about offering couples the opportunity to renew their vows over a glass of wine?

Why not create a special service for couples who want to renew their marriage vows even if their wedding didn't take place in your winery?

Connect: how do you connect and stay in touch with consumers who have visited your winery? Get them to 'like' your Facebook page. Send them an electronic Newsletter. If you've won a medal in the Ontario Wine Awards, the Canadian Wine Awards, Intervin or the All-Canadian Wine Awards, brag about it in social

media. Invite consumers down to taste your winning wines. And for those couples who got married in your winery – send them an anniversary greeting each year.

Inform: Play politics: The Wine Council has worked out the economics of the sale of a bottle of Ontario wine versus an imported wine – what it means to the Ontario economy in terms of jobs and revenue. Let the consuming public see the benefits to buying Ontario rather than a Chilean, Argentinian or South African wine. With each purchase of bottle of your wine hand the buyer a card that spells out what it means to the local economy to buy an Ontario wine rather than an import.

Remember, you have home field advantage over imported wines. You're here on the spot to explain and inform. Resurrect Ontario Wine Week – the 3rd week in June and encourage restaurants to pour Ontario wine by the glass and serve local produce.

Ally yourself with local farm producers and hold BBQs during the summer, give consumers recipes that match your wine.

Ally yourself with local chefs who know how to use your wines.

And think big. Think beyond your borders. Because wine knows no borders. You are part of the global wine industry. Make sure you, your winemaker, your staff taste the wines of the world to understand what consumers are tasting and buying.

Because there is a need to begin exporting in a meaningful way. We've made a beginning of establishing international exposure with I4C and the London and New York adventures. There is another one in May with Bordeaux reds and Rieslings. But we need to do more to educate and promote abroad.

My colleague David Lawrason was in New Zealand last month at a pinot noir event for winemakers and international media. He told me – and I quote: ‘Among the winemakers and press I met in New Zealand there was virtually no recognition or understanding of Canadian wine. At a four day pinot noir conference, as speaker after speaker listed off the world's other pinot regions, Canada was never publicly mentioned as a grower of pinot noir.’

He added: ‘If we can get the global market to make some noise about us, Canadians will become far more confident. That is the Canadian way.’

In 2015 the Americas will be coming to Toronto for the Pan Am Games. As an industry are you ready to welcome them and show them your best? And please, let’s not have the embarrassment we experienced at the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver when visitors at official functions were served off-shore blends.

For the Pan Am Games I would like to see all Ontario wineries unite and come together to present the best wines we make - as an industry and not as competitors. Here is a heaven-sent opportunity to prove to the world that we are more than Icewine. That Ontario has matured as a wine producing region whose wines can stand on the restaurant tables of the world without a blush. We have to think globally but first - if we are to be proud of our heritage - we have to honour our local terroir. Thank you.