

DEBBIE PRATT
Retired, Inniskillin Winery



If you put me in perspective, my first introduction to anything to do with grapes, was my mother going out and picking with a group of ladies who had more fun than you can imagine. I mean, they were all mothers who had kids at home, so to do a job, to get out on the farm and have fun exercise and all that, they loved it. So that was my first exposure, through the Lambert family.

From a professional capacity, I was very seriously thinking I would retire as a schoolteacher. I started teaching in '69, '70 at a little rural school, and this is all too unbelievable, on Line 3 and Concession 1, so almost across from the existing Inniskillin now. I met Donald [Ziraldo] through friends and had the opportunity to listen to Donald and Carl [Kaiser] talk about this project of making wine. I knew nothing about wine, and of course, it was wonderful to be able to listen to people talk about anything but their kids, because when I would go out, people would say, Debbie, our teacher isn't this and this and that. I thought, wow, now I have this topic of grapes, and how to grow grapes, and premium grapes, and what can grow and what can't, and these two guys are looking at starting a winery based on premium wines, to make premium wines from premium grapes grown in the Niagara peninsula.

As you well know, teachers have two months off in the summer, so I went by to visit Donald at the winery site, which was doubled up with Ziraldo Nurseries, and a young lady named Marion LeBlanc was working there. She seemed really busy with people coming in to buy some wine, and this was, again, in about '75. And I said, "Oh, Marion, you look really busy. Is there anything I can do to help?"

And she said, "Debbie, I have to go to a funeral in New Brunswick tomorrow. Can you come in and take over for me for five days?"

So, I said, "Sure."

She just tossed me the keys, and said, "Okay, come in tomorrow at nine – I'll tell Donald and Bobby," (Bobby Ziraldo was running the nursery and Donald was running the winery out of the same little office).

Basically, that's how I went from listening to Donald and Carl talk, to actually helping, and then it was hands-on learning. I'd have to say Donald was the agrologist. He was the grower. He knew agriculture. Carl knew how to make wine. So, I had the two people that could answer all my questions, and I had a lot of questions because I knew nothing when I started. But I was curious, and my curiosity kept me asking more questions, which, quite frankly, all goes back to what you're talking about today. With the Grape Growers, it was all about what we could grow, where we could grow it, and how that impacted making good Ontario wine.

First of all, what Carl and Donald wanted to do was move away from labrusca and into growing hybrids. At that point in time, the early 70s when Donald and Carl started, they only made wine from hybrids. That was all that was available for Donald to get Carl, in terms of grape varieties, to make a good quality wine. Those grapes were, specifically, Maréchal Foch, De Chaunac, and Chelois, and that's what Carl started with.

When Donald tasted what Carl made from the hybrids, he said, "Wow, this guy knows how to make wine."

Carl said, "Well, I could make even better wine if I had more vinifera."

So that prompted Donald, in 1974, to plant the vineyard that now is owned by Albrecht Seeger, and right across from Inniskillin Wine. Seeing what Carl could do with hybrids, it prompted Donald to plant Chardonnay, Riesling and Gamay, because at that point, the wine world was paying attention to the highest quality wine grapes, which are the viniferas. Carl didn't have access to those, and Donald couldn't affordably find him those grapes back in '74, so he said, "Well, if we can't buy them, we'll grow them."

From '74 to '77, Carl continued to make hybrid wine as the vineyard across the road that Donald planted established viniferas. 1977 marked a big watershed for not just Inniskillin, but for the Grape Growers and the wine industry as a whole, as the early Inniskillin vinifera vintages were reviewed by wine experts like Michael Vaughn and Tony Aspler. Again, it goes back to a very simple philosophy that relates to the Grape Growers, which was to make premium wines from premium grapes, grown in the Niagara peninsula.

What was also happening at that time in the world of wine was the emergence of new world wines from Australia and California (as examples). Uniquely, they were naming their wines after the grape variety which today most people take for granted. Until then the classic European wines were named after the Chateaus and whatnot. When Donald saw that aspect of what Australia and California were building their success on, he said, "If people are buying Chardonnays from California, and Chardonnays from Australia, we'll jump in the market and see if they'll try Chardonnays from Ontario." Again, a very simple concept for people today, not a simple concept back in the 70s.

To me, that was the major point when I came into it and as a teacher and an educator. I looked and thought, well, this is where I need to work with our consumers. Not just me, of course, because Donald was doing marketing and PR then, but that was the simple concept, linking to the success of other new world wine regions, and we are still considered a new world wine region. That was a big, major watershed.

There were too many blended wines before this point, and too many generic names of wines. The shift to vinifera grape growing and the whole philosophy of being successful at that – and not just at Inniskillin, but also other wineries like Chateau Des Charmes and Cave Springs – was focusing on the premium grape and working with the growers to say, "What can you grow with the acreage that you've got?" – this was the prelude to the creation of the VQA. My role was in helping the consumer understand that change.

The second part to that was that for so many years the consumer said, "Why am I paying more money for an Ontario wine than I am for wine from California or elsewhere?" What people didn't

understand was that you paid more money, per ton, for different grapes. If you explained how much a hybrid brought in per ton, it helped the consumer understand why they don't pay the same for all grape varieties.

Then the third thing that I think is important, is the growers having to take a risk because they were now looking at taking out grape varieties that were winter-hardy and disease-resistant and putting in these new European varieties that had to have way more maintenance and work done with them. That was the learning process for everyone, but without it, there would've been no premium wine business in Ontario. To achieve it the growers and the wineries had to work together.

At this time the government had to understand the logistics of the transition – if they're asking growers to take out labrusca and to plant viniferas, where are the incentives? There were a lot of political issues involved in there, which is exactly why I brought up Donald, because he was integral in all of that.

The consumer needed to be educated that high quality, vinifera-based wines were now a product of Ontario. As an industry, we had to be open and very transparent about the grapes, where they could grow, why the climate, the soil and all of those details, were so important, which was a big communications lift. But for the crop shift to be successful we had to establish that the consumer understood about Chardonnay, Riesling, etc. and that was a big task.

When consumers had a wine that was 100% from a single grape variety they could understand the typicalness of it, its characteristics. At this point you take the next step and get into reserve designations, because consumers were now saying, "Hey, this is good. What else have you got that's really unique?" So, you take people through the steps, and this is where the growers are so integral. For example, the Chardonnay drawn from X number of growers across the region is all Chardonnay. To go to a reserve designation, which targeted the emerging demand for more high-end, specialized Ontario wines, the reserve would be handpicked from select vineyards and then often aged in oak. That would be a more expensive wine, but a finely crafted one – creating that understanding and demand was key.

The next step was the most fascinating for me: the single vineyard designations. We wanted the consumer to understand that this specific grower from this particular vineyard grows this particular grape on this particular soil. We promoted Albrecht Seeger and the Seeger Vineyard. We promoted Gerald Klose and the Klose Vineyard. There were many others. You could actually see the progression from the consumer's point of view, that they might have started in the old days, spending \$10 on a blended Chardonnay, \$15 on a Chardonnay reserve, and maybe \$20 to \$25 for a Chardonnay from a single vineyard. It piqued their curiosity, and it peaked what they wanted to learn, and they began to say, "Well, tell me why the Seeger Vineyard is different from the Scheule Vineyard." They now wanted to know the age of the vine, the type of soil, microclimate, all of that – it was fascinating to see this shift.

I would do tastings, and I would line up a flight of a 100% Chardonnays (for example) blended from a group of Niagara vineyards, including several designated as reserve. Then I would bring out a Gerald and Martin or an Albrecht and say, "This grower grew with these grapes on this soil and the characteristics of these factors went into this bottle of Seeger Vineyard Chardonnay," and they would be able to taste and appreciate the difference.

You have to keep up with your consumer. That was the task. If you've convinced your consumer that our growers can grow good quality grapes, vinifera grapes, then you have to get into what is it that also is going with the uniqueness of that wine. Then when they have a dinner party, and they sit down and they say, "Oh, I have a Chardonnay here from the Seeger Vineyard." This was a more European focus on the vineyard itself and the history and characteristics of its land, but also, leading the designation was the grape variety. It was all Chardonnay. To me, we had to keep up with the increasing sophistication of the consumer. You had the artistry of the growing as well, then combine that with the artistry of the winemaking to add even more richness and complexity, and then an interesting story unfolds about the Chardonnay in their glass.

A further marketing refinement was the development of the culinary tourism component. I think if you're looking at what's new and thriving, besides the single vineyard aspect and sub-Appalachians, the inclusion how the chefs have worked with local cuisine, including the area wines, that has again created strengthened partnerships between the growers, the wineries and the consumer.

I have to say one of the lovely key phrases that makes me smile whenever I say it, because we did use this at Inniskillin, is partners in excellence.

So, partners in excellence, to me, meant how do you strengthen what you're doing? To me, the growers and the wineries were an example of partners in excellence. The growers, the wineries, the chefs, the tourism partners, together they created the destination aspect, which they all promote. Let's face it, in the end, every partner we have in the tourism business sells wine. That's connection. What benefits one benefits them all. It's a collective effort and it's a collective future. Look at where we are now with tourism and culinary components added into the grape growing in the wine industry, and how do we keep that going? It's paying attention to who are your other partners. Whether it's cultural – the Shaw Festival comes to mind as a beneficial attraction for the wineries and their partners – whether it's historical or like the Falls a phenomenon of nature, you're only going to be successful if you're going to work collaboratively, collectively, and supportively.

What is it that everybody's concerned about now and it affects every one of those partners – is the environment and climate change. To me, the focus on the present and the future is how do we maintain our success and also be careful to be protectors of this special environment and climate change in particular. So, all of the partnering sectors in this story must look at how we work together to help the environment and the challenges that it faces.

We have to look to our governments, and to our research stations like Vineland, and all those who have the ability to do to fund or conduct research. The biggest assets in this, besides the Vineland research station, would be Niagara College, and Guelph and Brock Universities. The students that are training, and the courses we've helped develop, are, hopefully, a big aspect of planning ahead to guide the industry to a solid future.

It links back to a quote that, when Donald Ziraldo was helping with the different aspects of both CCOVI (Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute at Brock University) and Niagara College, he had a phrase that I just love, and I know Dan Patterson used this quote a lot, and that's so important to this future. It is that every great wine region has institutes of higher learning, because that's an important connection. If we're not educating for the future, we've got a problem, and we know we have challenges in the future for agriculture, and that will have the

ramifications for the wineries and all of their community partners. Having in people like Debbie Inglis and all the wonderful people at the universities and the Niagara College taking seriously the science of grape growing and winemaking is being proactive across the board. That's what our industry needs now because we can't be complacent. We can't rest on the past. We've had great successes, but we have to analyze what those successes were. To me, those successes were based on building for the future.

That is the most important part that I see, as I read things and I talk to young people, and I see the wonderful people we've got out there growing grapes is there's whole new generations of families whose kids are working the farms where they weren't before, educated in the latest agricultural techniques and knowledge, and combining that with their hands-on experience from growing up in the industry. That, to me, when you look at this last 25 years, is what would you and I will be talking about 25 years from now, and it is my hope that all of the partners in the effort, including the environment and climate, are strengthened by the addition on the educational sector.

I've grown up with this, in terms of 40 years of being involved, and there's a heart and soul go into it. With every grape grower, when I go out on a cold day and I see people out in the vineyards – I mean, for a lot of our work at the wineries, we were in lovely rooms that are heated, and we were having lovely dinners and receptions and functions. All the while, especially with Icewine, I could be at a function and the first thing out of my mouth would be, "Well, while we're here, there's crews out in minus 10 degrees Celsius picking grapes."

I think that the biggest thing in all of this is to say, and really appreciate, the conditions that the grape growers work in, because they're hard. They're really hard conditions, and they don't get a chance to roll over in the morning and say, "Oh, I'm not going to go out today. It's too cold," or "I'm not going to go out today. It's raining." They're out there like the mailman, through rain, sleet, snow and hail.

Yes, when you live and breathe it, when you're in the grape and wine industry, it is a part of your heart and soul. You take it with you through each day."

Listen to full interview here: http://ggo75.am-live.ca/media/5o3jhxz5/gmt20220519-175838_recording-debi-pratt.3gp

