

DON ZIRALDO'S GAMBLE

Inniskillin House is betting that (a) they can make good wines and (b) that Canadians will buy them. For the exciting sequel, tune in this fall at your local liquor store

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Since time immemorial, farmers not only grew the grapes, they also made the wine. The most famous French châteaux were established by farmers who owned fields of grapes. In Canada, however, the situation is very different. Grape growers are not usually winemakers. Thus, the kinds of grapes they have been growing are based on yield and heartiness, not wine quality. This, combined with the aftereffects of Prohibition and the network of restrictions laid down by provincial liquor control authorities, has contributed to the rather dubious reputation of Canadian wines. Why waste your time making wines from scarce wine grapes when you've got a protected market for cheap, sweetened Concord wines?

I made these points in a column exactly one year ago. Since that time, it warms my heart to report, the situation has begun to change. Several Canadian wineries have begun producing wines which, although they'll cause no great consternation in the cellars of the House of Rothschild, are as good and in some instances better than many imports that the LCBO sells for between \$2 and \$3 a bottle.

Three factors have contributed to this change. First, some wineries are making serious investments in research into better varieties of grapes and refining the techniques that transform them into palatable wines. In addition, grape growers have finally become convinced that the preferred grape varieties can survive in the Canadian climate. As a result, some very drinkable new hybrid wines are now appearing on the market. The big news, however, is that for the first time since the 1920s, at least one new winery has opened its doors in Ontario. No, it's not owned by Kraft or General Foods or ITT. Two of the five

owners, and the ones directly involved in the operation, are an honest-to-goodness son of the soil named Don Ziraldo, a 26-year-old agriculturalist who grew up in the Niagara fruit belt, and Alain Rigaud, a 29-year-old winemaker from the University of Dijon. The winery, Inniskillin House Wines, is based in a converted packing shed amid the vineyards near Niagara-on-the-Lake. Ziraldo and Rigaud started the venture two years ago with their own savings, plus loans from the Ontario Development Corporation and from a bank. They're approaching winemaking as an honored

craft as well as a business, and they're gambling that Ontario's hybrid and vinifera grapes can produce table wines that will be comparable to the imported competition.

The initial inspiration came three years ago. Ziraldo, after graduation from the University of Guelph, was working in his family's nursery and one day became intrigued with the idea of making some wine from some of the special vines he was selling to his customers. A knowledgeable friend, Karl Kaiser, a chemist and winemaker who learned the art in Austria, actually made



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Don Ziraldo: his "boutique" winery produced three red wines this year

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the wine. Surprise! The stuff turned out to be quite palatable. It got Ziraldo thinking: why not a "boutique" winery that would produce good wines in small quantities?

A few weeks later, Ziraldo set up a meeting with an official at the Liquor Licensing Board to explore the possibility of getting a winery license. The meeting was brief. The last such license, the official explained, had been issued in 1929. But the board's chairman, Maj. Gen. George Kitching, was keen on the idea when he heard about it. "We had a meeting," Ziraldo says, "and the General suggested that I prepare a sample batch of wine to be examined by the board's tasters.

"While Karl prepared a few barrels of wine in my house in St. Catharines, I wrote a brief outlining the type of wine operation we envisaged. By the fall of 1974 we were ready. The brief and a few bottles of our de Chaunac wine were submitted to the Board. Naturally, we were very nervous; our whole future depended upon the taste buds of a few experts. Then word came. The wine was good and we'd been granted a manufacturer's permit to produce up to 10,000 gallons of table wine. That's 60,000 bottles! (Actually we only made 5,000 gallons or 30,000 bottles.) Then, in June, 1975, we were granted our Ontario wine license. We could hardly believe it. You know, you hear so much about payoffs and all that, it didn't seem possible that hard work and patience would be sufficient. But I give a lot of credit to Gen. Kitching, who loves wines and has been quietly crusading for a sane control system."

Around this time, Ziraldo met Alain Rigaud, who'd been buying vinifera grapes at his nursery. Rigaud, who had worked as a winemaker for one of Ontario's wineries, had just formed a partnership with two other wine enthusiasts and purchased 45 acres of prime land near Vineland, Ont. He, too, dreamed of starting a winery and mak-

ing fine wines from his newly-planted Pinot Chardonnay, Gamay, Pinot Noir and Maréchal Foch vines. Rigaud's credentials were impeccable, having spent three years at the Institute of Oenology in Dijon, two years studying the science of oenology and another year of business administration at the University of Dijon. His three years with the Institut Cooperatif de Vin, where he was in charge of quality control for the wines of some 30 French producers, gave him a depth of knowledge equalled by few in the industry. The two men seemed almost destined to become partners.

The partnership was cemented when the license was granted. And then the problems began. One night about two years ago, for instance, their vines were invaded by a couple of wild rabbits. "What was two feet high at sunset," says Rigaud, "was only eight inches high by dawn. And then when Don bought a new piece of land for vinifera vines, he discovered that the adjoining property was registered as a bird sanctuary. Very expensive bird feed! Fortunately, the sanctuary turned out to be part of Don's property, and the birds have been encouraged to rest elsewhere."

The process of naming the winery had the same accidental quality. "One day," says Ziraldo, "Gen. Kitching phoned out of the blue and asked what we were going to call our operation. Grasping at straws, I blurted out, 'Chateau Inniskillin.' I thought about it for a couple of seconds and decided that sounded too pretentious. So I told the general I'd simply be calling it 'Inniskillin House Wines.'" (The name comes from an early settler in the Niagara region, Col. James Oliver Cooper who, after the War of 1812, settled on a 100-acre parcel of land granted to him by the Crown that included part of the present-day vineyard. He named his property after the Inniskillin Regiment in Scotland, with which he had served for many years.)

The project represents a considerable gamble. "Everybody who looks at it," says Ziraldo, "tells us it's one of the riskiest ventures they've ever seen." There are dozens of imponderables—not the least of which is the question of raw materials. Inniskillin House plans to use hybrid grapes, which are a cross between the vinifera grapes grown in the great vineyards of Europe and a prolific North American variety. One of their gambles is that they'll be able to obtain a reliable supply of grapes at an economic price.

There's another big gamble: will Canadians buy the wines they make? When Inniskillin wines hit the market this fall, they'll be priced in the \$3.50 to \$4 range—a bit costlier than the cheapest imports. Will Canadians choose an Inniskillin product in preference to an imported wine retailing for around

\$2.50? "We couldn't even bottle water for that price," says Ziraldo.

At least they don't have high labor costs. Besides Ziraldo and Rigaud, there's only one other full-time employee. When they need extra help for bottling, workers from the nursery pitch in part-time. It is not what you'd call an elaborate operation. "You can see that the winery isn't much to look at," says Ziraldo, gesturing at the barn-like structure that is the chief physical manifestation of the House of Inniskillin.

They're still tinkering with production techniques. Their first fermentation took place in a large plastic container, after which the wine was immediately placed in barrels for aging. Now they are in the process of installing a 5,000-gallon stainless steel tank. "That's what they use at Château Latour in Bordeaux," says Ziraldo. "Afterward, we'll place the wine in wooden barrels for a short time to develop character.

"At first, Alain thought we could use traditional European methods on hybrid grapes, but it seems that the fresh fruit character is destroyed if we put the wine in the barrel too soon. Moreover, if you leave the wine on the lees (the yeast deposits) for as little as one week too long its taste can be ruined. Barrel aging is tricky enough, since you have to watch the wine constantly and keep all the containers completely filled. Air will quickly destroy a wine. The nitty-gritty of sterilizing, steam-cleaning and sulphiting these barrels takes a lot of the glamour away from winemaking. It's darn hard work."

Proper bottling also presents a lot of problems, he says. "For our first lot we used extra-long, first-quality Portuguese corks. Unfortunately, these corks are more appropriate to the long-necked Bordeaux bottles than our Canadian Burgundy-styled bottles. An air space has to be left for expansion and some consumers may be concerned that the bottle is not filled to the very brim. It's impossible to do this.

"Another concern is the presence of some sediment in the wine. During our first bottling, there was some sediment visible in the bottom of the bottle after a period of aging. We decided to re-bottle the entire lot." (This is unfortunate. Any expert will tell you that a wine's sediment is harmless and requires only a little care upon serving. Moreover, excessive filtering may reduce the wine's character.)

This year, only three red wines will be available from Inniskillin. The two premium wines, 1974 De Chaunac and Maréchal Foch, should be available at the LCBO's Rare Wines and Spirits Shop (20 Market Street) this November for \$3.95 a bottle. Only 500 bottles of each have been made. Both are named after the French hybrid grape varieties which were used exclusively in their produc-

tion. De Chaunac is named after Adhemar de Chaunac, a French-born agronomist, who emigrated to Canada in the 1930s and devoted his life to improving Canadian wines. This variety generally produces a pleasant medium-to light-bodied dry table wine which can benefit from a little aging.

Maréchal Foch, an Alsatian hybrid derived from the Pinot Noir and Gamay, produces a fuller-bodied dry table wine, usually with greater depth, and an aroma somewhat reminiscent of a red Burgundy. Of the two, I prefer the 1974 Maréchal Foch, which has excellent acid balance, lots of fruit, great depth and is surprisingly ready to drink for a 1974. These grapes had a very high level of natural sugar when picked and no sugar had to be added prior to fermentation.

"It's important to give the grapes enough time to ripen," says Rigaud, "since natural grape acids are transformed by the sun into sugar. An extra week or two will make all the difference in the world. Adding sugar to immaturely ripened grapes may save money. But it's not the answer, since the resulting wines will be lacking in character and style."

Inniskillin's third wine, Vin Nouveau, is a blend of hybrid grapes—Maréchal Foch, De Chaunac, Chelois and Chancellor. It's a wine that should be drunk young and very slightly chilled. Some 2,000 cases (24,000 bottles) of this wine should be available at regular LCBO outlets by mid-November and will sell for \$3.50 a bottle. We tasted this wine out of barrel in the storage cellar and it was slightly "numb" at 52 degrees. It did, however, show promise and should be a fruity, dry, medium-bodied table wine.

Ziraldo has great hopes for his operation. "By next year our production should be doubled. This year's crop has been excellent so far, hot and dry early in the summer, and then cooler in August—ensuring even, unscorched ripening.

"The only problem is getting the grapes, as our own newly-planted vineyards are operating at about one-fifth of their potential. We don't buy any labrusca grapes, so some farmers are reluctant to sell us their preferred grape varieties alone. I was fortunate to pick up a ton of Gamay grapes last week. We aren't sure exactly how we'll use them. It really depends on how the grapes ripen."

With that, Ziraldo quietly led me to his new 70-acre vineyard. He bent down to examine his one-year-old Riesling vine. He quietly fondled it and said, "I can't believe how these things have grown."

Then, with a slightly embarrassed grin, he looked up and said, "You know, I really love these things."

And that's what it's all about. ■

Fine new bubbly from Niagara

Make way for Canada's first fine sparkling wine producer—the Podámer Champagne Company Ltd. of Beamsville, which is within cork-popping distance of the Queen Elizabeth Highway in the heart of the Niagara fruit belt. On September 4, 1973, the LCBO granted a limited license to Karl Podámer "to produce authentic French-style champagne made in Canada." Now, two years and \$930,000 later, their 1973 bubbly is finally bursting on the market.



Credit for these excellent wines lies with 51-year-old Karl Podámer, who has been making sparkling wines since he was 9 and is only one of 19 registered French champagne-makers in the world. Prior to World War II, Podámer worked in his father's winery (also called Podámer's) which was officially licensed by the Hungarian government to manufacture and sell champagne. Like many refugees, he came to Canada penniless and worked as a butcher, hoping one day to return to his boyhood trade. Fortunately, he was able to inspire a group of 12 Niagara-district businessmen, who provided Podámer with the funds required to establish a viable operation. Podámer is the firm's vice-president and general manager and its largest single shareholder.

One of the new firm's key acquisitions was a number of large Austrian white oak barrels which give the wine

an exceptional bouquet and flavor. Podámer insists on making the wine in the traditional French manner, by bottling the wine before its secondary fermentation begins. Once the pressure is allowed to develop naturally in the bottles, they're placed neck-down in racks.

Then, every day for two months, the wine is given a very slight shake and a quarter-turn. This causes the sediment to slide down the bottle's side and rest on the cap, facilitating its removal. Podámer then *personally* opens each bottle, permits the sediment to explode out of the bottle, quickly tops the bottle up and then corks the whole frothing mass. The process involves no artificial carbonation or additives.

The results have already been hailed a success. One New York wine syndicate has bought 16,000 bottles of Podámer's Brut for their fine wine stores in New York City. "Of course," says Samuel Burnstein, Podámer's chairman of the board, "a tremendous amount of expertise went into this champagne. Karl flew back and forth to France on a number of occasions to consult with fellow wine-making colleagues in order to arrive at a perfect blend. Hopefully, we'll double production to 130,000 bottles next year." In any case, there will be four fine wines to celebrate the New Year with this year:

ROUGE 1973 (595B-\$7.40): A unique pink champagne, made with a number of fine new hybrid grape varieties.

EXTRA DRY 1973 (726B-\$7.70): A very slightly sweetened version of the Brut, in the Cordon-Rouge style.

BRUT 1973 (727B-\$7.70): A special blend of Delaware, Duchess and Seibel hybrids, this wine has an excellent full mellow flavor with a hint of oakiness and long aftertaste. Certainly better than many of the imported champagne-styled wines I've tasted recently.

SPECIAL RESERVE CUVÉE (545B-\$9.25): This is the first pressing—the cream as it comes off the top—with some preferred grape varieties added, such as the Pinot Chardonnay. Only 5,000 bottles of this wine will be available. M.V.