



Don't forget Lake Erie Shore

Wine lovers flock to Niagara, but Pelee area also has lots to offer

By Michael Pinkus

SO, YOU'RE PLANNING your summer get-aways. If you're anything like me, you may have a few long weekends planned (and not just the official ones).

It's probably no surprise that many of mine centre around wine, including events in Niagara.

But I also make trips to the Lake Erie North Shore, including the vintage tasting event (Aug. 11). This event used to come under the SWOVA (South Western Ontario Vintners Association), but is now known as EPIC (Essex Pelee Island Coast) — a drastic improvement in a moniker if ever I've seen one.



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Many Ontarians scratch their collective heads when I mention this wine area because it is our least celebrated region. The Essex Pelee Island Coast winery route, roughly in the Leamington to Amherstburg area, is the home to familiar Pelee Island Winery and Colio Estate Wines, but it is far from a two-winery show. And it is well worth a pilgrimage, especially if you're a fan

of reds.

This is Canada's most southerly wine region — that's not a misprint or a typo, I did say Canada. Being southernmost does have advantages, especially in the grape-growing department.

On average, the region gets a four-week advantage on other growing areas in Ontario — they can start two weeks earlier and can be picking two weeks later. That can be the difference between ripe Cabernet and Shiraz and ones that retain grassy, earthy and vegetal notes from under-ripeness.

Over the past decade, there has not been the great push in this region that there has been in, say, Prince Edward County. Sure, they've seen their share of growth, but not to the extent of other regions. And this is why Lake Erie North Shore is perfect for a long weekend trip.

It has 17 wineries, each with something good to offer.

Because I have limited space, I'll get you started with some recommendations of places to visit, but don't just stop with these nine, visit them all.

The full list of EPIC wineries can be found at

<http://epicwineries.ca>.

Sanson Estate: This one is not on the website, but a visit to Sanson Estate was my first in the area and has left a lasting impression. <http://dsanson.mnsi.net>

Owner Dennis Sanson is a bit of a wild card, taking the movement of farm-to-table to a whole new level; he's also a maverick and free-wheeler when it comes to his wines. A case in point: he made a glorious 2007 Syrah — probably the best I had tasted in the region — and yet he has no plans to ever make another. He is a whiz with Vidal and Baco and also makes fantastic red blends.

Pelee Island Winery: We go from one of the smallest to the biggest. Pelee Island wines have been all over the LCBO for years — they have the cute birds on their labels. At the winery, you can check out their more serious offerings in the form of the Vine-dressers series, Pelee's reserve line that does not find its way to the monopoly shelves.

Muscudere Vineyards: Brothers Roberto and Fabio Muscudere started this winery in 2003 and from day one have thought big and never looked back. From the massive foot-thick cellar door to the pizza oven on

the outdoor patio, these brothers continue to push the boundaries of not only what makes a memorable visit but also what makes memorable wine — they make some of the best reds in the region.

Sprucewood Shores Estate Winery: Built up over the last decade, Sprucewood's beautiful grounds, which run all the way back to the lake, might just take your breath away. Good thing you have a good glass of wine to bring you back to life. Winemaker Tanya Mitchell knows her way around Chardonnay and Riesling, just as much as she knows her reds — and for this region, doing whites well is more of a challenge.

Mastronardi Estate Winery: It's the innovative thinking that's behind this winery. They put on some of the best events in the region so if you can build your trip around one of their concerts or dinner theatre events, you'll be doing yourself a favour. Mastronardi was also the first to see a niche market in summer refreshment, bottling their always popular Sangria that they sold

exclusively at events by the glass.

Colio Estate Winery: An old winery can be taught new tricks. The winery that makes Girls Night Out has recently acquired winemaker Lawrence Buhler, transporting him from Niagara (Peller Estates) and bringing him in to run the show at their Lake Erie facility. He is re-invigorating this 33-year-old winery. Look for newer vintages of CEV which will have Lawrence's touch to them. Niagara's loss was definitely Lake Erie's gain.

Colchester Ridge Estate Winery: Winemaker/owner Bernie Gorski is a welcome addition to the Lake Erie region. This winery, known locally as CREW, boasts an additional claim to fame in that they hosted George Clooney in their tasting room. Gorski also seems to be inspiring his family to get involved in the wine business with another Gorski heading up the new winery venture called North 42.

Viewpoint Estate Winery: One of the crown jewels of the region — the vision of

John Fancsy, auto magnate — this is an enviable winery complete with a beautiful view of the lake, massive barrel cellar, cooking school — you name it it's either there or in the plan. They also take the "We will release no wine until it is time" motto seriously, as you can still find some 2007 being sold at the winery.

Wagner Estate Winery: This winery is the closest to the 401 (just south) in the town of Lakeshore. Owner Harold Wagner has an apple orchard and decided to add a winery for year-round tourism. Wagner dabbles with all kinds of local fruits, grapes and fruit-grape combinations. A fruit winery may be treated like a second-class citizen in Ontario, but Harold Wagner's place deserves plenty of respect.

I could go on about Oxley, Cooper's Hawk, Aleksander, D'Angelo, Erie Shore, Smith & Wilson or Black Bear Farms, but I'm out of space — and I have to leave some surprises for you to find, because that's what makes visiting wine country so much fun.

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