



KEITH BEATY/TORONTO STAR

At Wyndym Farm, David Perkins and wife Nancy Thompson-Perkins cultivate exotic and rare greens, mainly for chefs.

Napa North

Niagara is booming as its trademark wineries are paired with restaurants, food shops and tourist transport

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WINE WRITER

Niagara has become Napa North.

In California's Napa Valley, there was an awesome symbiosis of wine and food in the 1980s and '90s. We're catching up at last.

With more than a hundred wineries going full tilt in Niagara alone, it was inevitable that a network of restaurants, specialty cheese and produce suppliers, and a glamorous synergy of ways to tour wineries would arise.

For those enamoured of wining and dining, three top-notch restaurants have added class to the region recently.

The latest gourmet mecca is Treadwell in Port Dalhousie. Opened in May by chef Stephen Treadwell, who honed his skills at Auberge du Pommier and Queen's Landing Inn, the restaurant specializes in farm-to-table cuisine, using the freshest local, seasonal ingredients. His son James, a certified sommelier, handles the wine list, with a focus on Ontario's best.

Impressive as well is Zest in the hamlet of Fonthill. Chef Michael Pasto recently awed me with his culinary skills.

We had requested in advance a special foie gras dish to accompany a 1986 Moulin Touchais white I was bringing from my cellar. He rose to the occasion with a superb foie plate that flawlessly matched this sweet, two-decade-old white, then went on to seamlessly sculpt dishes to accompany the complex Ontario reserve pinot noir we brought as well that night.

If you want to pull out all the stops, Restaurant Tony de Luca at the recently renovated Oban Inn in Niagara-on-the-Lake offers a superb chef's table.

Chef de Luca, a pioneer in sourcing fresh regional ingredients, has a stellar regular menu. But if you book the chef's table, he can step outside the confines of usual dishes and unleash his awesome culinary creativity on a series of innovative courses.

Of course, many of the wineries have their own restaurants on site. Among my perennial fave raves are the always elegant On the Twenty at Cave Spring Winery in Jordan; the Restaurant at Peller Estates in Niagara, which offers sumptuous lunches in a posh room or on the patio; and the Peninsula Ridge Restaurant, where chef Robert Trout serves up divine dishes in a historical house that overlooks Lake Ontario in the distance.

Winery owner Norm Beal has restored the building to its Victorian purity. Food Network chef Ned Bell ran the show at this restaurant before decamping and moving on to a string of five restos in Calgary.

Where are all these gourmet elements coming from?

Some of the ingredients seem impossibly exotic for the area and are not normally seen in Toronto's finest eateries. While I found no edible flowers sprinkled on the dishes, as in Napa, many of the finest greens and veggies stem from one major source: Wyndym Farm in Niagara.

Before 1997, co-owner David Perkins was a home-trained chef in a high-stress job as a Niagara Region policeman. His grandfather had been a greengrocer in England. His private passion, not talked about too loudly in the cop shop, was food research and cooking.

"My job as a policeman was high stress bordering on suicidal. We saw too much life and death every day," says Perkins.

He had a dream of providing fresh food to chefs. "I saw how chef Michael Olson used to visit hobby farmers on a bicycle in the late '80s and early '90s and have them grow asparagus and raspberries."

In 1997, inspired as well by Raymond Blanc's chef's garden at a Relais & Chateau in Warwickshire, England, Perkins launched his dream farm, planting heirloom vegetables. And he began knocking on chefs' doors.

"As an artisanal producer, I started growing for menus," says Perkins of his breakthrough in this exotic agri-game.

All his produce is now handpicked à la minute, says the grower. As for the off winter months, he spends them cooking at top restaurants in the region.

Perkins tried the farm-stand routine nine years ago and wound up selling for half the price of what he could get from restaurants. And he hated the fact his stand would be deserted for hours. After prominent write-ups by food critics such as James Chatto, he was inundated as flocks of foodies arrived in his driveway. Nowadays, he apologizes, "I don't grow for the public."

Instead, he runs a VegClub on the Internet (wyndymfarm.ca) that is capped at 150 people, with a waiting list. Each week, members can order the latest exotic greens and vegetables, and the crop is picked and left for them in the barn.

Some veggie hounds will drive 150 kilometres or more to pick up a box containing bok choy, tat-soi, chard, shiso or mizuna from Perkins' field of greens.

"Supply has always been less than demand for us," admits Perkins. "I've had to hide stuff that we pre-sell to restaurants like Treadwell's."

Things like gem lettuce, 15 kinds of carrots from Persia, rare species of arugula, lemon cucumbers, golden beets -- each week the list changes. He also does limited edition tomato confit, glazes and stocks, and has free-range eggs, but for members only, first come, first served.

Like Napa, Niagara has a variety of transport to whisk you to your favourite wineries. You can avoid the designated driver syndrome by opting to have someone else ferry you around.

Yes, there's a raft of tour operators, who seem to change each year. But for special transport, you can opt for Niagara-on-the-Lake Wine Country Tours, which take you to a rotating list of wineries in a quaint trolley. It leaves from Queen's Landing Inn and other venues. A three-hour guided tour is \$55.

If you want to step up in class, try Niagara Classic Cars. A fleet of Rolls Royces, Bentleys and funky old London cabs can whisk you to and from wineries or restaurants in high style. The company admittedly mainly does weddings, where the Daimler Majestic 1962 Limo, the Singapore PM's former vehicle, is trotted out. However, arriving at a winery in a Rolls is sure to turn a few heads.

Some folks celebrating anniversaries or birthdays have opted to drop in on their favourite winery restaurants by helicopter, flying out of the St. Catharines airport.

Niagara Helicopters Inc. conducts regular 20-minute Niagara Falls flights for \$139. For winery flights, pilot Brandon Gardner says the company most commonly takes passengers to Hillebrand, Peller Estates and Château des Charmes, or a winery of their choice, for \$399 a couple, which includes the Niagara Falls grand tour.

Should you want to fly further afield, say to Beamsville region wineries and restaurants, Gardner says, "We can arrange any flight almost anywhere, as long as the property owner allows us and it is not within a built-up area."

I am still waiting for the ultimate winery tour -- by hot air balloon -- to match my exotic flights years ago over the dawn mists in the Napa Valley. So far, I have not found such an enterprise, which would be perfect with a flute of Ontario bubbly waiting in the vineyard after the descent.

Speaking of sipping, my favourite winery tasting spots are the stainless steel, ultra-modern room at Stratus, and a private mahogany-panelled tasting bar hidden upstairs at Peller Estates. Each serves nibbles of exotic food with wine poured in crystal glasses, the shape showing off best the particular grape variety being tasted.

But what about cheese, that indispensable accompaniment to fine wine?

Henry of Pelham Winery has a little cheese and deli shop that offers exotic sandwiches and nearby picnic tables to dine at -- great for a quick fix while pretending to do *Sideways* things.

Truly serious cheeseheads have two new magnets in the region.

In Niagara, inside Forum Antiques on Niagara Stone Rd., Chef de Luca's Cheesemarket and Deli Shop does a brisk business with local and Quebec gourmet cheeses. It's an odd marriage: old cheese and even older antiques.

In a mini mall in Port Dalhousie is Olson Foods and Bakery, owned by Food Network Canada star Anna Olson. The outlet is well layered with delicious cheeses as complex as the delicious desserts made by this pastry chef. Fresh baguettes, Spanish serrano ham, and cheese exotica greet a steady stream of gourmet-minded patrons.

The latest global trend wafting into Niagara is an official breakdown of its many different soils and growing areas into an official wine appellation system. There are now 12 sub-appellations in the Niagara Peninsula grape-growing region.

This is kind of fun -- imagine how wine lovers will go nuts trying to taste the subtle differences between Beamsville Bench and Vinemount Ridge chardonnay. Or Four Mile Creek and Twenty Mile Bench pinot noir.

I only hope it doesn't get as complicated as the French or German appellation systems, where every speck of earth seems to have a different name and ranking of quality. Which would really drive Canadians crazy.

We have enough trouble keeping up with the new veggies and wines and cheeses, without playing jigsaw puzzle with terroir.

Sante!

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