



Hidden Bench Revealed

Niagara newcomer Hidden Bench Vineyards and Winery is the featured Ontario producer at LCBO Vintages outlets this month, which means that four wines from one of the region's best producers are enjoying a rare bout of wide-scale availability.

It's sometimes difficult to recall that Hidden Bench only emerged last year, releasing a stellar portfolio that winemaker Jean-Martin Bouchard had been quietly producing in a tidy little corner of Beamsville. It's hard to discuss fine Ontario wine today without referencing this operation.

A specialist in Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Riesling, three varieties that any Niagara producer with serious ambitions should be concentrating on, Hidden Bench also produces compelling wines with Sauvignon Blanc, Gewurztraminer and, in suitable years, Bordeaux red varieties.

"Focus is a funny word for us," says Bouchard, a native of Quebec, who worked extensively in Australia and British Columbia's Okanagan Valley before settling in Niagara. "Obviously we inherited a lot of varieties from vineyards that were already planted. Focus would mean our priorities and focus of what we are planning to plant in the future. It's where we want to grow.

"That doesn't mean because we are focused on Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Riesling, we aren't very serious about the other varieties we are dealing with."

Bouchard has made his biggest splash to date with a Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon blend named Nuit Blanche. The 2005 vintage was named as the county's best white wine in a national competition and announced the arrival of a serious new player. The real story, however, at least to my way of thinking, was how consistently well-made the whole range was. There wasn't a dud in the mix.

Ordinarily consumers have to make the pilgrimage to the winery or order online via www.hiddenbench.com to get a hold of these small batch wines. We're talking case productions of hundreds of cases here, not thousands. So this LCBO spotlight offers wine lovers a chance to audition a bottle or two so they can see what the fuss is all about.

While the Hidden Bench Chardonnay and Riesling on offer are solid and exciting examples of the varietal, I'm particularly taken by the power and finesse of the 2006 Fume Blanc. This is a smoldering beauty, with smoke and zesty grapefruit notes. Fans should sign up now for its big brother, the 2006 Nuit Blanche.

Bouchard says he's happy with the style of Sauvignon Blanc he has established at Hidden Bench. Pointing out inspiration from earlier examples made by others at Sumac Ridge in British Columbia and at Vineland Estates in Niagara, the passionate winemaker ultimately gives the most credit to the vineyard where the fruit comes from, the Rosomel Vineyard.

"I'm not sure if our success is related to the clone that we are using, the site we are using or the age of the vines," he says. "I see other very good vineyards and other good producers in the region, but overall I know what we are dealing with is special. Having worked with the fruit from there for three years, I know that I am lucky to work with this vineyard."

