

Hidden Bench Vineyards and Winery

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I attended the opening of one of Ontario's newest, and possibly most important wineries and I want to share my thoughts on this event and what it means for Canadian wines.

The occasion was the "official" opening of Hidden Bench Vineyards and Winery on Locust Lane in the heart of the Beamsville Bench. This property is owned by Harald Thiel of Toronto and represents the culmination of a concentrated effort over the past several years to accumulate some of the very best parcels in the area, replant some of these, build a *cave* with some of the most sophisticated equipment on the market today and conduct a search for a winemaker with a compatible philosophy to Harald's.

Harald and his brother were successful entrepreneurs who built a prosperous audio-visual business, a North America-wide business that was noted for its quality and service. The business was sold a few years ago and the brothers Thiel each went on to things they really wanted to do, in Harald's case building a top-tier vineyard and winery on the Beamsville Bench. Harald is a perfectionist in every thing he does and, in the case of Hidden Bench this character trait definitely benefits the consumer.

I tell anyone who will listen to me that the Beamsville Bench is emerging as the most important wine region in Ontario and will soon carry that mantle for Canada. This region rests on slopes that gently edge down to Lake Ontario on the northern face of the Niagara Escarpment west of the city of St. Catherines. The Beamsville Bench has a micro-climate that protects the vines in the cold winter and retains warmth in the summer. The sloping fields facilitate good drainage forcing the roots to burrow deeply into the clay-loam soil for nutrients.



Harald Thiel is an avid fly-fisherman, here holding forth to a rapt audience at the HB opening, June 21, 2007

The only fruit used by Hidden Bench wines is grown on Hidden Bench vines – this is a true estate domaine. One of Harald's parcels is the Rosomel Vineyard, a 26-acre property which has supplied fruit to many of the best winemakers in the region for the past thirty years. This parcel was planted by Roman Prydatkewycz, who has agreed to stay on as vineyard consultant to Hidden Bench.

After an extensive world-wide search, Harald found and hired a Canadian, Jean-Martin Bouchard, as his winemaker. Jean-Martin studied oenology in Australia and has worked in Australia, France, Germany and most recently Sumac Ridge Winery in the Okanagan Valley.

Harald has built a winery that is understated when compared to some of the architectural statements that have been built in the area over the past few years.

Rather than invest in buildings, he has invested in equipment – the focus is on wine, not ego, at this property.

There you have the formula – select the best terroir you can find, get the best vines and a legendary grape grower, hire a winemaker with global credentials and provide him/her with the best tools, mix with an unalterable commitment to quality and... stand back! The early reviews are universal in their acclaim for Hidden Bench and its wines. This is a property to watch. It sets a new, high standard for quality and character and will pull the already high standards in this region to another level. A very exciting chapter in the Canadian wine story is now being written on the Beamsville Bench and Hidden Bench will be shown to be a major contributor to that chapter.

I will report more on the wines of Hidden Bench in the next Newsletter but I tell you these are the best Canadian wines I have tasted. There is depth, concentration, balance and character in every one of the wines and I should point out... several of the wines I have tasted to this point are the second wines – some of the *first-growth* wines are still in the cellar prior to release later this year. The wines are not cheap, befitting their craft/small lot character, but they are very good value wines.

The wines of Hidden Bench are only available at the property or in a small selection of fine restaurants in Ontario and Quebec. Production is very small and many of the wines are available on strict limited allocation terms. Tastings are offered on the site and are intended for serious consumers only (the cost of a tasting is \$10.00 per person). If you plan to visit the vineyard I recommend you call ahead to set up an appointment. Check the Hidden Bench website for more information and directions: <http://www.hiddenbench.com/>.

(Disclosure: Harald Thiel is a neighbour and friend of mine. This fact aside, I would not write about this property if the wines didn't warrant my comments. I have no financial interest in Hidden Bench Vineyards and Winery and have received no compensation for this article.)

John Switzer is Toronto-based wine writer and agent. His agency specializes in wines from the south of France.

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