

The Top White, Red, Sweet and Sparkling Niagara Wines of 2011

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What a perfect little year for buying and drinking Niagara wine.

It had a little bit of everything. The tail end of the big 2007 reds were released, we saw at least three vintages of Riesling arrive (08, 09 and 2010) on retail shelves, the well-aged Chardonnays from 2008 were offered up for sale as well as the 2009s and even some 2010 unoaked Chards along with what just might be the best vintage for Pinot Noir in Niagara's history — the 2009s.

Toss in some Pinot Gris, Syrah (we saw at least four vintages arrive throughout the year from various wineries), and Gamay and it all adds up to a year of great drinking (or cellaring, depending on how you enjoy your wines).

Yes, it was a very good year for buying wine. And a tough year to come up with this annual list of the **Top 10 White** and **Top 10 Red** wines of the year. A new category was added this year, the **Top 10 Sweet and Sparkling** wines of the year. It's not exactly the perfect place to put both sparkling and sweet wines, but that's what we did, at least for this year.

The Top Reds of 2011 are dominated by the Pinot Noirs from the 2009 vintage as well as some late-released 2007 reds.

My Red Wine of the Year is from Lailey Vineyard's excellent Pinot Noir program from the 2009 vintage. So many great pinots were released (and are still being released) from 2009 that it was difficult to single out just one for the wine of the year. But the Lailey Lot 48 has all the hallmarks of great Pinot (at least for my palate): Purity of red fruits, elegance, finesse, a balanced approach to oak and spice all delivered on a silky frame.



On the white side, another traditional Burgundian varietal took top honours. There wasn't a lot to write home about from the 2008 vintage in Niagara, but the Chardonnays have proven to be a pleasant surprise. And in the expert hands of the winemaking crew at Hidden Bench, gorgeous Chards were produced, but the crème de le crème was the Tete de Cuvee 2008, a blend of the best barrels from the Locust Lane and Rosomel Vineyards. I remember first trying this wine with then assistant winemaker Jay Johnston (now head winemaker at Prince Edward County's Keint-he Winery) and thinking, wow, I have not tasted a Chardonnay in Niagara with this much of everything that is good about this varietal and finished so perfectly as a balanced wine. It is, simply put, a magnificent wine that will age beautifully in your cellar. Very little of this wine was available to the general public, but there were some cases released in the retail store.

And, while Chardonnays and Rieslings dominate the Top 10 Whites of the year, a nifty and consistently good Pinot Gris, the Fielding Estate Rock Pile, has been a perennial top white on the year-end list.

Narrowing down the year-end Top 10 most exciting Niagara wines of the year is always a difficult task. Tasting notes are scoured for the wines that were top scorers (all scoring 90 points or higher on the 100-point scale) and memorable looking back on the reviews.

And just a further note on this list. It's a totally subjective list, which means everyone, of course, has their own views of what they think should make the list. I would love to hear your thoughts so please feel free to comment below. All comments will be published.

Here we go (wines are listed from the top wine of the year in each category followed by the other wines in alphabetical order).

The Top 10 Red Wines of 2011

Lailey Vineyard Lot 48 Pinot Noir 2009 (\$60, 94 points) — Lot 48 is made by winemaker Derek Barnett only in the very best vintages in very small quantities (Derek told me just before Christmas that there are still some bottles for sale at the winery and the 2010 vintage is waiting in line to be released). This is wonderful stuff. Pure cherry, vanilla spice and toasty oak on the nose. But the true pedigree of this wine shows itself on the palate. Such a ripe core of red fruit and wonderful silky texture in the mouth, with perfect spice and oak nuances. Interesting all the way through the finish.



Alvento Aria (Nebbiolo) 2007 (\$35, 92 points)

— This Neb spent 18 months in Burgundy oak barrels, 70% of which was new oak. What a nose! Roasted meats, dried sweet cherries, cigar box cedar, leather, currants, blueberry, loam and vanilla toast. It's youthful and vibrant on the palate with red cherry, tar, minerality, firm tannic structure and a long finish. Enjoy now with game, beef or other red meats or save in the cellar for five years as all the moving parts come into balance.

Coyote's Run Rare Vintage Pinot Noir 2009 (\$50, 93 points) — The Rare Vintage wines are made only in the best vintages from the best fruit on the estate. Winemakers David Sheppard and president of the winery, Jeff Aubrey, identify special barrels that make up the blend. They hit the nail on the head with this Pinot. A nose of bright black cherry, sweet vanilla spice, toast and persistent, elegant aromas that are absolutely beautiful. The palate shows ripe cherry and raspberry fruit with kirsch and bramble notes chiming in. It's rich, stylish and harmonious in the mouth. Among the best Pinots tried from the 09 vintage.

Creekside Reserve Shiraz 2007 (\$35, 93 points) — You may want to stock up on this as there will be no 2008 or 2009, but there will be a 2010 vintage made. This is a big, burly, meaty Shiraz with red and black fruits, roasted meats and layered in spices and oak tones on the nose. The mouth shows a highly structured, still youthful wine rich in blackberry, currants, spice, and toasty vanilla. One for the cellar, 10 years or more.

Jackson-Triggs Delaine Vineyard Syrah 2007 (\$33, 92 points) — A classic cassis, plum, pepper, blueberry nose that's rich, spicy and inviting. It's smooth on the palate with rich currants and raspberry fruits with smoke, pepper, spice and licorice. A big single-vineyard Syrah, laden in fruit, that cries out for a juicy steak pairing.



Jackson Triggs Gold Series Delaine Vineyard Puncheon Pinot Noir 2008 (\$45, 92 points) — A rare and special Pinot fermented with wild yeasts in 500 litre puncheon oak barrels and 12 months of barrel aging in French oak. Only 250 cases were made. A superb nose of warm cherry pie, floral notes, cloves, plum, vanilla and oak spice. A wonderful mouth of ripe cherry accented by cloves, baking spices and elegant oak. Such great length on the palate. A gorgeous Pinot.

Lailey Syrah 2010 (\$27, 92+ points) — This is one spectacular Syrah. Barnett has a way with this varietal, always crafting some of Niagara's elite Syrahs vintage to vintage, especially in the warmer years. He sources his fruit from a small block of vines in the Tregunno vineyards on the Niagara Parkway, near the quaint town of Queenston. The style evokes the great Northern Rhone Syrahs with a nose of roasted meats, pepper, intense black fruits of blueberry, currants and bramble to go with layers of spice that chime in harmoniously. It's the contrast of meaty aromas and purity of fruit once it hits the palate that is the lasting memory with this sensational wine. Beautiful and textured, with blueberry, cassis, and meaty-spicy notes on a bed of plush tannins makes this such a great wine. It has that swagger, that gout de terroir, and has clearly established itself among the top Niagara reds.

Le Clos Jordanne Le Grand Clos Pinot Noir 2009 (\$75, 92 points) – Fruit for this top Pinot in the portfolio is sourced from the best block of fruit located on the limestone-rich western side of the Le Clos Jordanne Estate Vineyard. It is much more classically Burgundian in style than, say, the Claystone, and shows more elegance through the profile. The nose displays ripe plum, cranberries, black cherries, loam, cassis, flinty minerality, violets, minty spices and toasted oak-vanilla. It is dry yet persistent on the palate, still super-tight and waiting to open up, but still

delivers wonderful red and black fruit intensity and balanced with wonderful spice and the elegance of fine oak. Wait on this, and it will return huge dividends. Potential for seven or more years in the cellar.



13th Street Gamay Noir Sandstone Vineyard Old Vines 2009 (\$28, 92 points) — An expressive nose of earthy blueberry-bramble fruit with cassis and lavish spices. The fruits explode on the palate and everything is all balanced out by firm acidity. 13th Street is one of the few wineries in Niagara that excels with this varietal.

2027 Cellars Queenston Road Vineyard Pinot Noir 2009 (\$35, 93 points) — All fruit is hand harvested, hand sorted and de-stemmed whole berry. It is wild fermented over 19 days and bottled unfinned and unfiltered. The youthful nose shows lightly spiced cherry fruit, truffle, cedar, floral, beetroot and vanilla. It's amazing in the mouth with penetrating, persistent red fruits, vanilla, sweet oak and spice. It's a graceful, elegant wine that shows its range of flavours and silky tannins through the finish

The Top 10 White Wines of 2011

Hidden Bench Chardonnay Tete de Cuvée 2008 (\$45, 94 points) — That is the highest mark I have ever given a Chardonnay in Niagara. And I might be underestimating it. This is perfection in a glass, or as close to it as it comes. The top Chardonnay at the estate takes the best barrels of fruit from Locust Lane and Rosomel and blends them into this magnificent cuvee. The 2008 vintage, in my opinion, is one of the finest for Chardonnay Niagara has seen in a while. It was rainy during the summer, but heat and sun at the end of the season and an excellent veraison period contributed to ripe, elegant and balanced Chardonnays. The wine spends 15 months in French oak with weekly lees stirring for the first 10 months. It is bottled unfinned and unfiltered and is fermented with indigenous yeast. The nose is spectacular with gorgeous minerality, bright lemon and white peach fruits and hinting at oak, nut and spice accents. It is a pure expression of the stony minerality derived from the Beamsville Bench's clay-silt-limestone soil. It is such a gloriously layered and textured Chard, with citrus-lemon, laser-sharp acidity, stone fruit, and spicy notes that are integrated rather than over-powering. This beauty is the epitome of elegant

Beamsville Bench Chardonnay, with a long, lingering finish. It is built to cellar up to 10 years. Hurry, though, very few bottles remain for sale.



Fielding Estate Rock Pile Pinot Gris 2010 (\$30, 93 points) — In my opinion, the benchmark for Pinot Gris in Niagara. Fielding’s Rock Pile comes from vines at least 25 years or older with 80% of the fruit barrel fermented in neutral oak. This is the best Rock Pile yet. Such an aromatic nose of mango, peach, sweet vanilla oak and a spicy caramel kick. It’s round and textured on the palate with ripe tropical/pear fruit and a long, long finish. Wow.

Flat Rock Cellars Riesling Reserve 2009 (\$30, 92 points) — This remarkable reserve Riesling from Flat Rock is sourced from a small lot within the estate vineyards. This is the first vintage for the new “red label” reserve wines. The wine uses a mix of wild and cultured yeasts and went through partial malolactic fermentation. It’s a weighty, powerful Riesling done in the Alsatian style with vibrant citrus, developing petrol notes and wet stone minerality. It’s complex, bold and has wonderful length on the finish. A real treat that will develop beautifully in the cellar for 10 years or more.

Inniskillin Legacy Series Riesling 2010 (\$30, 93 points) — In a lot of ways this is a repeat of the 2008 Legacy Riesling except with more fruit intensity and a touch less acidity. The nose is like a bowl of fresh-cut peaches drizzled in wild honey with a gentle squeeze of lemon and lime wedges. It shows wonderful fruit intensity on the palate with notes of dried apricot, mango, peach and a thread of grapefruit running through the core. It’s made with 16 g/l of residual sugar but tastes like less in the mouth. I love the lithe texture of this wine and the mingling minerality. It’s hard to stop to sipping this gorgeously balanced and juicy wine. Simply delicious.



Pondview Bella Terra Chardonnay 2009 (\$24, 92 points) — The wine was aged in 100% new, 60% French and 40% American oak for 12 months. It starts with rich, spicy vanilla, toast, apple tart and tropical-pear fruit on the nose. It's rich and layered on the palate with integrated, yet with well-defined fruit and spice that's persistent and lingering through the finish.

Thirty Bench Small Lot Steel Post Riesling 2010 (\$30, 94 points) — This is what Niagara Riesling is all about. The key word is balance and this is perfect in that regard. An abundance of lime, peach and minerals on the nose. The palate reveals a sensational fruit package of citrus, stone and tropical fruits that come at you in waves with wonderful added wet stone minerality in a balanced approach. This is decadent stuff, and one that will age 10 years or more.



Ravine Vineyard Reserve Chardonnay 2009 (\$38, 92 points) — This is a gorgeous, stylish Chard with vanilla cream, tropical, apple fruits and lovely spice. Fine oak and spice in the mouth, great acid backbone and ripe fruits suggest a long life in the cellar.

Rosewood “Wild Ferment” Reserve Chardonnay 2009 (\$28, 93 points) — Natalie Spykowsky has taken a guarded approach to naturally fermented wines. This is her first Chardonnay using natural yeasts, which took 22 days to ferment, by the way. It is a stunning wine. The nose shows butterscotch, nutmeg, wild honey, vanilla, toast, apple, tropical fruits and lovely spice from 12 months in new and older French oak. It delivers pure elegance and

gorgeous texture in the mouth with ripe fruit, spice and oak already showing integration. All that and wonderful cleansing acidity.

Tawse Estate Quarry Road Chardonnay 2008 (\$35, 92 points) — This beautiful Chard is barrel fermented and barrel aged for 12 months in French oak (20% of it new). It displays purity of fruit on the nose with soft oak-spice-cream notes, apple, zesty citrus and subtle minerality. It's fresh and vibrant in the mouth with juicy, creamy fruit, integrated spice and length through the finish.

Vineland Estates St. Urban Vineyard Riesling 2010 (\$20, 93 points) — This Riesling from the iconic St. Urban vineyard is highly aromatic with tropical fruits, peach and minerality. It's so lovely on the palate with fresh sweet-tart fruit notes and rich, layered flavours on a bed of minerality. Buy, drink and tuck some away in the cellar.

The Top 10 Sweet and Sparkling Wines of 2011

Chateau des Charmes Paul Bosc Vineyard Riesling Icewine 2009 (\$65 for 375 ml, 94 points) — Wow, what a beautiful icewine. The nose is killer with sweet wild honey, apricot, peach and quince that comes at you in waves. It's thick, unctuous on the palate with sweet, concentrated fruits, honey goodness and balancing acidity.

Chateau des Charmes Estate Bottled Brut NV (\$26, 91 points) — This bubbly is a classic cuvee of 50% chardonnay and 50% pinot noir made in the traditional method. It is a consistent non-vintage wine that has a beautiful burst of fresh citrus and apple on the nose. A vigorous mousse on the palate to go with lime, lemon, apple and toast flavours all leading to a long, clean, crisp finish.

Cave Spring Cellars CSV Blanc de Blancs 2004 (\$40, 93 points) — This amazing sparkling wine spent 63 months on the lees, longer than any other Champagne style wine made in Niagara (until the wine below was released a few months after this one). It's labeled under the iconic Cave Springs Vineyard designation, reserved only for the very top wines at the estate. Incredible yeasty-bread aromas to go with lemon-citrus, apple and soft vanilla-toast. It shows gorgeous crispness on the palate, layered fruits and a lively mousse. A spectacular 100% Chardonnay bubbly.



Creekside “X” Blanc de Blancs 2000 (\$50, 92 points) — Imagine sitting on a sparkling wine for 10 years, the owner passing by the bottles year after year wondering why they aren’t for sale. Winemaker Rob Power and marketing guru Matt Loney resisted the urges of Creekside owners, in those early years of needing cash flow, by telling them that it would cost thousands of dollars just to finish the sparkling wines. So, there they sat on the lees for a decade. Power says they’ve gone on for as long as they can, finished in as dry a style as they “dare.” The wine appears to be still in the glass, with micro bubbles that explode in the mouth. It’s a silky sparkler with citrus, pronounced yeast-biscuit flavours and glorious texture and complexity. Only 110 cases were made, and well worth the buy.

The Good Earth Late Harvest Cabernet Franc 2010 (\$29 for 375 ml, 92 points) — Wow! A terrific late harvest wine with a gorgeous nose of nutty dried fruits, sweet red berries and strawberry-raspberry compote. It rocks on the palate with kirsch, toasted almonds, marzipan, sweet (but not too sweet) cherry-strawberry flavours and a rich texture. Super yummy late harvest goodness.

Henry of Pelham Cuvee Catharine Rose Brut (\$30, 93 points) — A lovely, elegant rose, made from pinot noir and chardonnay. The nose is all about fine citrus-apple-strawberry fruits and toasty notes. Bright red fruits and zesty citrus flavours fill the mouth of this crisp and delicious bubbly.



Inniskillin Sparkling Vidal Icewine 2008 (\$70 for 375 ml, 94 points) — Right up there with the best sparkling icewines I have tried. A honey-laden wonder with apple strudel, apricot and exotic dried fruits on the nose. A fair amount of acid on the palate gives this sparkling icewine a lot of freshness on the palate to go with a lively mousse and concentrated tropical fruits, spiced apple and peach.

Maleta View Old Vines Dry Sparkling Riesling 2007 (\$28, 91 points) — This will appeal to mineral-driven, petrol-loving Riesling fans. Maleta owner Daniel Pambiachi says this wine is “what makes it all worth it.” The wine spent 18 months on the lees and another year in bottle. It shows layers of mineral-petrol on the nose with citrus, apple and biscuit aromas. The palate reveals a wonderful assault of foamy bubbles, toast, and balancing acidity. This is one of the top sparkling Rieslings made in Niagara.



Reif Estate First Growth TBA Riesling 2009 (\$50 for 200 mL, winery only, 93 points) — Sublime on the nose with buckwheat honey, dried apricot, sweet tropical fruits and marmalade notes. It’s viscous and wildly exotic in the mouth with lemon pie, honeycomb, tangerine and racy, zesty acidity to balance the sweet notes. A lip-smacking treat.

Riverview Buona Notte White Icewine 2010 (\$100 for 375 ML, 94 points) — When you think about the shriveled up, botrytised (noble rot) Riesling, frozen on the vine into tiny little marble-like orbs, and the labour that goes into a single bottle of wine along with the two thirds of the wine that's frozen Vidal grapes, you start to understand the steep price. Getting Riesling at 100% TBA is risky business. Making it into icewine? An astonishing feat. And the wine? Oh, the wine! An exotic nose of pure marmalade, the kind Grandma makes, with orange-citrus peel, minced peach and then the honey kicks in, then touches of caramel and roasted almonds. It is an extraordinary wine with extreme concentration, candied fruits, toffee and a finish that lasts and lasts. Not particularly laced with balancing acidity, but enough to tickle the palate. Stunning.

Enjoy!