



Winemaker Jean-Martin Bouchard, left, vineyard consultant Roman Prydatkewysz, centre, and owner Harald Thiel are the principals behind Hidden Bench winery in Beamsville, which officially opens Saturday.

New winery fast off the mark, looks for 'serious' consumers

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WINE CRITIC

BEAMSVILLE—An amazing Ontario winery is about to open its doors. Hidden Bench is a profound discovery.

Very few new wineries land on their feet running, with a stable of great wines ready to rock.

I discovered Hidden Bench on one of my explorations of Niagara regional wineries this Victoria Day weekend.

The brainchild of owner Harald Thiel, Hidden Bench is in the Beamsville Bench region. Thiel, who with his brother made his fortune running a North America-wide audio-visual business, began his artisanal winery in 2003, but the 2004 wines did not meet his expectations and were declassified and sold off. With more mature vines in 2005, total production is just 3,000 cases.

All Thiel's wines are sourced from his three vineyards — Locust Lane, Rosomel and Felseck. "If we don't grow it, we don't make it," Thiel says. The focus is on chardonnay, riesling and pinot noir. The winery has state-of-the-art, environmentally friendly equipment, with geothermal energy providing cooling and heating for the building and the winemaking process.

The enfant terrible behind these incredible wines is winemaker Jean-Martin Bouchard. From Quebec, Bouchard learned the secrets of his trade in Australia (at Penfolds and Torbreck) and Europe (Alsace and Germany). He also did a stint at Sumac Ridge in B.C.

The vineyard consultant, Roman Prydatkewysz, is a major player. A former Niagara Grape King in 1992, his impeccable viticultural practices are key. You can't have great wines without great grapes. The public will get the chance to taste some of the wines Saturday when the winery officially opens.

Thiel envisions the winery will ultimately be 70 per cent red production, but for now, due to longer aging needed for the reds before release, it will open with only white wines.

Tasting the wines is a breathtaking experience, but so are the prices,

which run to \$70 a bottle for the flagship red blend. Of course, Hidden Bench is not alone in charging \$40 for top-end whites and more for cult reds from Niagara. And so far, a handful of boutique wineries are getting away with it, simply because the wines are so stellar that they rapidly create a loyal fan following.

As Thiel says: "We will be looking for serious consumers and charging \$10 for a tasting of three wines." Some of the wines can be purchased now directly from the winery (details at hiddenbench.com). gstimmell@thestar.ca

HIDDEN BENCH WINES

All sales are at the winery only.

TERROIR CACHE 2005 (\$35, RATING 91/100)

This cab-merlot-cab-franc blend offers smoky cigar box; rich wild blackberry and cherry intensity. It's very long and rich. Thiel calls this an entry-level red meritage.

2005 BRUNANTE (\$70, 93)

This monster flagship red has violet, sumptuous black currant and silky textured black cherry stylings with tons of complex notes, including vanilla bean, lilacs and wood smoke. Release of this is still unknown, but only 120 cases were made.

NUIT BLANCHE 2005 (\$40, 93)

This meritage blend of sauvignon

blanc and semillon is a phenomenal white, with smoky toasted coconut, lime, apple and a whiff of tar, rich with minerality and golden apple flavours. With only 120 cases made, sales are limited to two bottles per customer.

VIELLES VIGNES CHARDONNAY (\$40, 91)

This fall release is driven by spicy intensity, with toasted oak and smoky apple and lime peel poise.

2005 ESTATE PINOT NOIR (\$35, 91)

Another fall release, with big, fragrant, wild strawberry, smoky beetroot and vibrant black cherry stylings. This is the winemaker's first pinot noir, which is equally amazing.