

# WineAccess May 23, 2009

## Niagara's Beamsville Bench has a few treasures; you just have to find them: Hidden Bench

*Posted May 23rd, 2009 by John Szabo*

Jean-Martin Bouchard, winemaker for Hidden Bench Vineyards in the Niagara Peninsula, Canada, is fully 'en form' and continues to push the envelope of quality for Canadian wine. This is JM's 5th vintage at Hidden Bench, having arrived in time to deal with the generally excellent 2005 vintage. But coming from South Australia, the reality of dealing with the challenges of cool climate viticulture quickly became apparent with the more difficult '06 and '08 vintages. "We're pretty confident we know how to handle these challenges now" says JM. There is really no major secret to dealing with cool conditions, acts of God aside. It's about the yields. One of JM's first moves in 2005 was to reduce each vine on the property from 4 canes to 2, effectively halving yields. Each year the average yields at Hidden Bench are among the lowest in the country as far as I know, usually under 2 tons/acre. Fortunately for JM, owner Harald Thiel supports these initiatives, not always an easy sell in this already capital-intensive, risky and low margin business.

But lower yields in a climate like southern Ontario's ensure consistent ripening, occasionally even slight over-ripening, as was the case in the unusually hot 2007 vintage. The additional concentration in the wines is equally evident. For the 2009 vintage there will be roughly 45 acres in production, with plantings of, Riesling, Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer, Semillon, Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and the Bordeaux grapes, including strong-performing Malbec. There will be a shift this year to organic viticulture in one of the estate's larger sites, the Felseck Vineyard, which is the most open and windy site with the lowest disease pressure. There are plans to convert other vineyards to organic practices if things go well. If there is one thing that is consistent about JM's winemaking style, it's the texture and length of his wines. Across the board the wines show a richness and voluptuous texture that is rare in the Niagara Peninsula, and the sort of lingering finish that comes only with significant flavour concentration. JM is not shy to use techniques and technology to arrive at his stylistic goal, mostly with great success, as with the 2006 Terroir Caché red Bordeaux blend. This is one of the most successful 2006 Niagara reds that I have tasted. Clever use of oak and texture enhancing techniques like micro-oxygenation were used to great effect in this wine to lessen the impact of generally lower ripeness levels, greener tannins and herbaceous flavours. The result is a highly polished, seductive and complex red.

Once in a while, this hands-on approach can go too far, as in the 2007 Fumé Blanc. This white shows over-the-top yeasty-lees character from extensive lees stirring during barrel maturation. Then again, it was the fastest selling white at Hidden Bench's latest release at the winery, so what do I know.

The Rieslings are not to be overlooked. I suggest picking up the mixed 6-pack, two bottles each of the Estate, Felseck and Rosomel Vineyard Riesling. Here, JM backs off and lets the terroir do the talking. All are made in the same way: whole bunch press with very low yield (about 500l/ton compared to more common figures of 700+), wild yeast ferment followed by several months settling in tank. JM is adamant about bottling late and holding the wines back at the winery longer than most to get them to the right place before release. The differences are remarkable, but the style is drier than most Niagara Rieslings, and each shows a brilliant streak of acidity, austere texture and great purity of flavour. The care and effort that goes into these wines is also reflected in their premium prices, but quality always comes at a cost. Below are reviews of the current releases. Go to Hidden Bench for more details.

### **2007 Hidden Bench Estate Riesling, Beamsville Bench, Niagara Peninsula**

Mainly from the Locust Lane vineyard. Clean, very fresh lively, lime juice and citrus, with some attractive lemon blossom flowers, mineral. Essentially dry, with just a pinch of residual sugar, which is balanced by crisp acid and low pH. Texture is silky and flavours are precise. Moderate length, quite decent flavour concentration. A wine to be enjoyed in the short to mid term to capture all of the freshness.

**2007 Hidden Bench Riesling, Locust Lane Vineyard, Beamsville Bench, Niagara Peninsula**

Ripe but delicate floral aromas and light mineral and honeycomb, though fairly reserved and austere at the moment. The palate seems close to bone dry, with very crisp acid and tight, lean structure. Linear and precise. Some more honeyed notes emerge on the finish. Moderate flavour intensity. Try again in 2010.

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**2007 Hidden Bench Riesling Rosomel Vineyard Roman's Block Beamsville Bench, Niagara Peninsula**

The most mineral flavoured of the Hidden Bench Rieslings, with intense wet stone, limestone, honey notes and pronounced yellow grapefruit - great purity and class. The palate shows really precise flavour and very tight, almost austere profile, crisp, pure and clean, low alcohol. This is a Riesling lover's Riesling that should age remarkably well.

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**2008 Hidden Bench Gewürztraminer Felseck Vineyard Beamsville Bench, Niagara Peninsula**

Very highly perfumed version, bubble gum, banana, peach blossom; intense but not exactly refined. Full, fat, with a pinch of sweetness, warming alcohol. Long perfumed finish. A take-no-prisoners style of GW for short-mid-term enjoyment.

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**2006 Hidden Bench Estate Chardonnay, Beamsville Bench, Niagara Peninsula**

Full, rich, intensely buttery and popcorn, crème caramel, butterscotch - abundant new, high quality oak. Dry, rich, silky round seductive texture from lots of lees stirring. Intensely flavoured. Marked acidity keeps this fresh on the finish. Fine balance between power and elegance, for fans of more full blown Chardonnay in the new world style.

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**2007 Hidden Bench Fumé Blanc, Rosomel Vineyard, Beamsville Bench, Niagara Peninsula**

Pronounced green tropical fruit notes, passion fruit, papaya, sautéed grapefruit, caramelized lime alongside pronounced yeasty-lees notes - a touch reductive; oak is certainly marked but not dominant. The palate is fullish, and surprisingly crisp, with pronounced lingering caramel-wood-yeast flavours. Long finish. A crowd-dividing, love-it-or-hate-it style wine, so take your side.

88

**2006 Hidden Bench Terroir Caché Beamsville Bench, Niagara Peninsula**

Half Merlot, along with Cab Franc and Malbec. Clean, open, fragrant fresh red and black fruit, herbal, and fresh coffee grounds - the wood fills in some of the green gaps. This is a wine based more on elegance and finesse, though there is no lack of depth and even a decent bit of fat. A very fine and food friendly wine that was obviously well-made and is a great success for the vintage. 500 cases made.

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**2007 Hidden Bench Pinot Noir Estate Beamsville Bench, Niagara Peninsula**

420 cases made, slated for release in fall 2009 - visit [www.hiddenbench.com](http://www.hiddenbench.com) to reserve your allocation. Bottled one month ago; the nose is a little muted but obviously very ripe and concentrated; in time it opens to reveal some intriguing licorice and dark fruit character; wood is totally integrated. The palate is full, lush, rich, with fat soft tannins. Densely packed with flavours - perhaps with less typical varietal character, but certainly impressive in a new world style. Drink 2011-2016.

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