

THE OTHER NIAGARA

The names are the same, but there the similarities end. The rush of excitement on this bountiful peninsula (just beyond the falls, in Ontario) comes from discovering farm stands, restaurants, wineries, and a burgeoning food scene



Stop right here!" demanded my wife. "But it's just somebody's house." "There's a sign under the trees: 'Niagara Herb Farm.'" So we parked and climbed out of the car. The sun was warm on the empty road—the welcome heat of a high summer afternoon on the Niagara Peninsula. We walked up the shaded drive, past the house, and into the backyard—a wild-looking country garden with an open-ended greenhouse. A woman with a watering can waved, then trotted out to meet us, dressed in head-to-toe denim.

An hour later, we set off again, weighed down with herbs and a harvest of knowledge from Arlene Mills, the farm's delightful owner. Raised on a fruit farm in the nearby village of Vineland, she learned all her lore from her grandmother and can explain the virtues of each of the 350 plants she grows.

Such serendipitous finds are part of the charm of Niagara, the first things that spring to mind when I'm back home in Toronto, at the top of some high-rise, and find my eye drawn to the southern horizon. There it is, faint and far away across the glittering water: Niagara's wine country, like a line drawn by God's green crayon between the lake and the sky.

Other people have other impressions. To truckers barreling along the highway from Niagara Falls, this stretch of lakeshore is a commercial corridor between the United States and urban Canada. To theater buffs, it's the last half hour before they can take their seats at the Shaw Festival in historic Niagara-on-the-Lake. But to those who love food and wine, it is Ontario's little Eden, rural but sophisticated, a land of fruit-laden vineyards and orchards, restaurants, wineries, and country markets.

My favorite way into the region isn't from Toronto at all—it's from Niagara Falls. Once you've quenched your thirst for the spectacle of the thundering waters and run the gauntlet of gimcrack sideshows, casinos, and generic hotels, head north on the Niagara Parkway, the prettiest road in all of Canada. On the right, manicured lawns and parkland tumble sudden-

ly into the vertiginous gorge of the Niagara River; on the left stand gracious houses backed by orchards and vineyards stretching away across the plain.

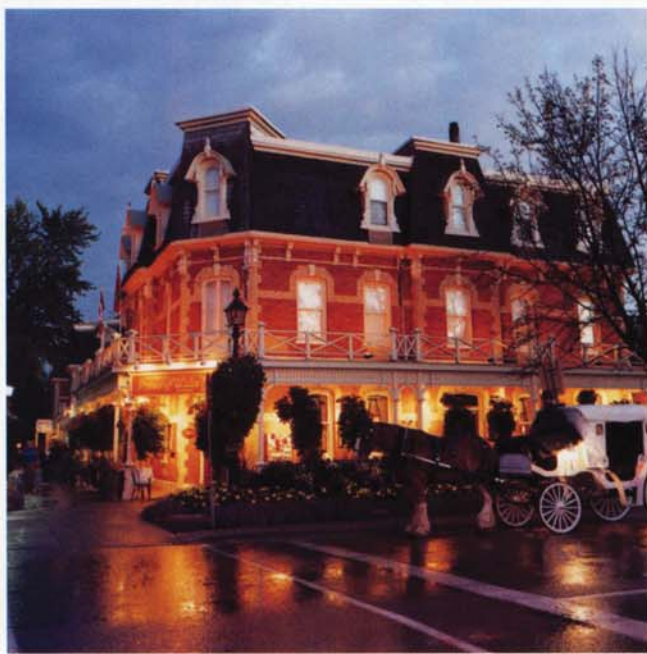
Turn off along one of the silent, dusty side roads and you may find Wyndym Farm, owned by retired cop Dave Perkins. His neighbors thought he was mad when he started planting heirloom tomatoes and other "obsolete" vegetables, growing them organically. Then local chefs came to call, lured by the superb flavor of the produce, and Dave didn't seem so crazy after all. Stephen Treadwell, the chef at Queen's Landing hotel, in Niagara-on-the-Lake, is a particularly favored customer. I'll never forget the sweet tang of the tomato salad I ate at his restaurant one late summer's day, the Wyndym tomatoes 20 minutes off the vine and still warm from the sun.

At the end of the parkway, the postcard-perfect town of Niagara-on-the-Lake has been flashing its skirts at the tourist trade for decades. There's something a little saccharine about all the faux-Victorian fudge shops, gift emporiums, and horse-drawn carriages, but an older and much more interesting history lurks behind the twee façade. In the 1790s, the town was Upper Canada's first capital, and though marauding American troops burned it to the ground during the War of 1812, many of the churches and buildings that were put up immediately afterward are still standing. Here the Loyalist past is as vivid and as carefully cherished as the glorious gardens that line the genteel side streets.

Unsurprisingly, given a centuries-old farming heritage and a climate that supports vinifera grapes, the gardens of the entire peninsula tend to the spectacular. But much more than flowers is involved. John Laidman is the forager for the restaurants of two of the region's big wineries, Hillebrand Estates and Peller Estates. "He sometimes shows up at the kitchen door with some really strange stuff," said Peller's former chef, Jason Rosso. "Like West Indian gherkins grown just down the street in someone's backyard. Or he'll come in with mud on his boots because he's been down in the creek cutting out the watercress. I never mentioned anything about vegetables on the menus because I had no idea what John would bring from one day to the next."

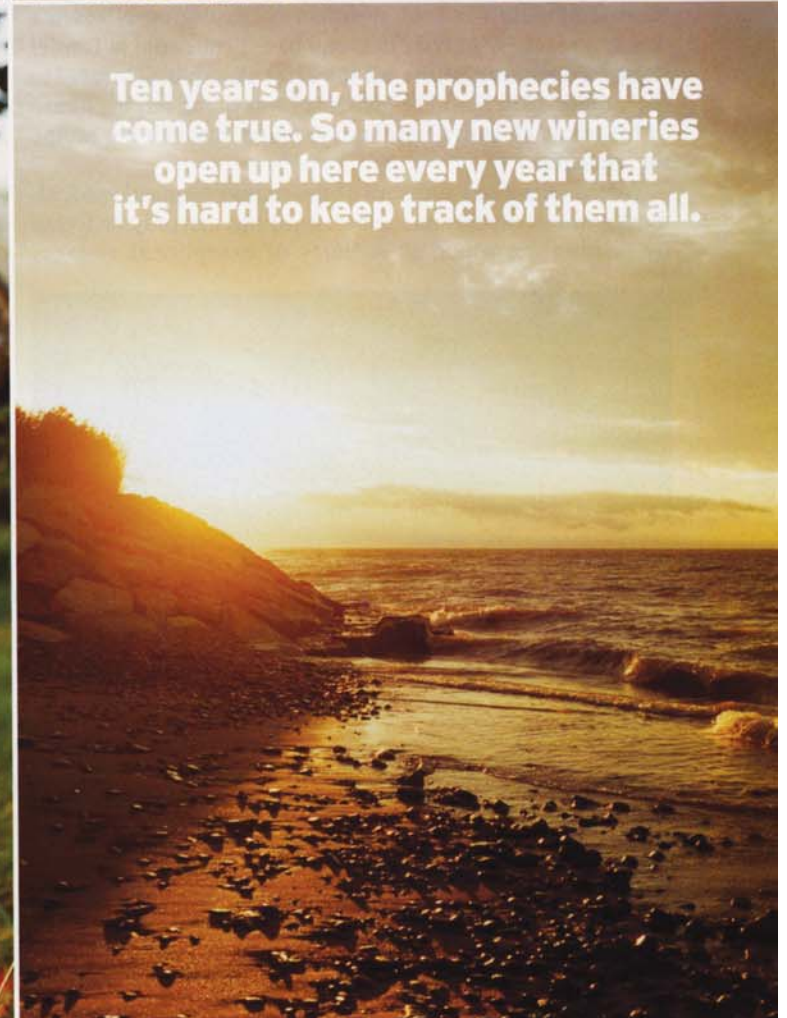
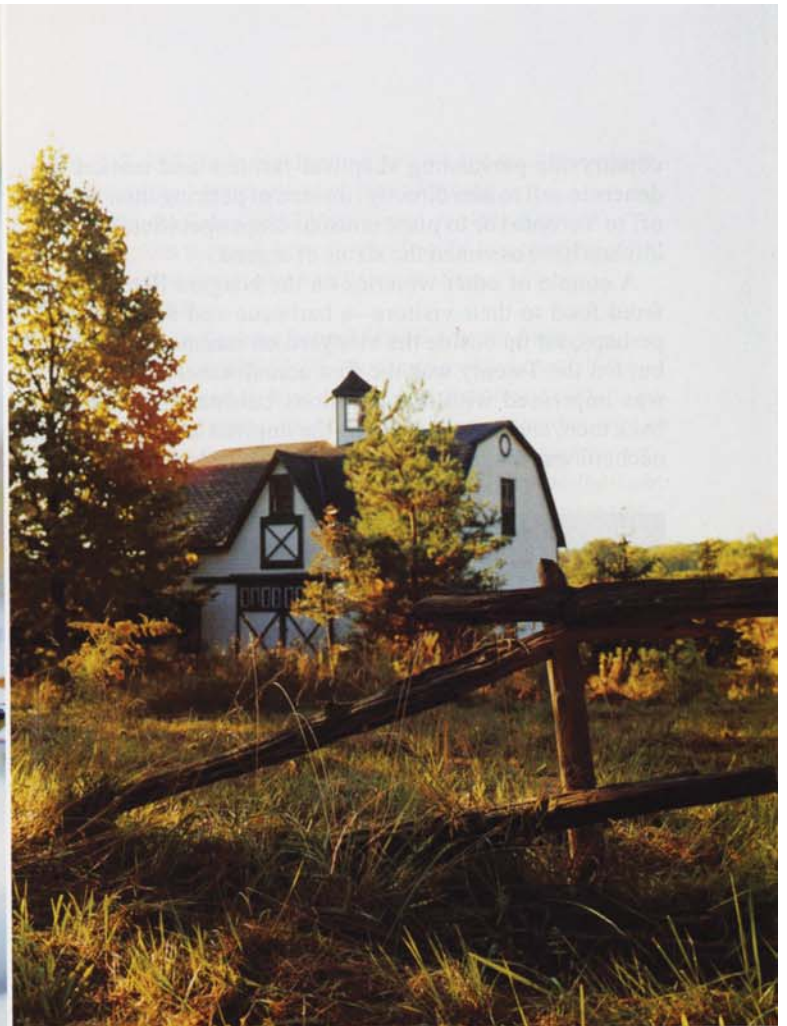
Laidman is unlikely to share his more private sources of supply, but adventurous visitors can do some foraging of their own, and that's where the fun really starts. You might stop by Grimo Nut Nursery, an unpretentious farm up by the lake where owner Ernie Grimo grows more than 100 different cultivars of nut trees—everything from filberts and black walnuts to rare Japanese heartnuts. Park in his farmyard, and, if he's not busy, he'll share lore and samples and demonstrate the machines he has invented to shell his various crops. Or drop in at Walker's Country Market, overflowing with bins piled high with local cherries, strawberries, and nectarines, and shelves crammed with homemade jellies. The sandwiches and salads made on the premises are perfect picnic fare.

Places like these help define the vague phrase "wine country cuisine," which is emblazoned across so many of the peninsula's menus. The logical notion of cooking to showcase local, seasonal, impeccably fresh ingredients is nothing new ("We've been doing that at home for generations," a bemused peach grower once assured me), but it wasn't until a decade ago, when winemaker Len Pennachetti opened the restaurant On the Twenty next to his winery, Cave Spring Cellars, that it really came to public attention. Tales of Michael Olson, the chef Pennachetti hired, cycling about the





Heirloom tomatoes and white peach salad from the restaurant at Hillebrand Estates. Clockwise from right: Rustic scenes from Niagara-on-the-Lake and the nearby shores of Lake Ontario; apples fresh from the farm. Opposite: The Prince of Wales Hotel.



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countryside persuading skeptical farmers and market gardeners to sell to him directly (instead of packing their harvest off to Toronto) or to plant unusual crops specifically for his kitchen have assumed the status of legend.

A couple of other wineries on the Niagara Peninsula offered food to their visitors—a barbecue and a picnic table, perhaps, set up beside the vineyard on summer weekends—but On the Twenty was the first actual winery restaurant. I was impressed with the ambitious cuisine when I tried it back then, and even more so by the implicit leap of faith Pennachetti was making concerning the region's future.

Ten years on, his prophecies have come true. So many new wineries open up here every year that it's hard to keep track of them all. Today, they number more than 60. Some are major concerns with impressive international sales and state-of-the-art facilities; others are small operations producing limited amounts of highly sought-after wines. (Daniel Lenko, Lailey, Malivoire, and Kacaba are names wine geeks should bear in mind.)

Pennachetti's Cave Spring complex is still one of my favorites. Located in the sleepy little hamlet of Jordan, its restaurant, winery, and gift and antiques shops are housed in an 1870 apple warehouse the size of a city block. Behind the building, the land plunges down into a wooded ravine, where Twenty Mile Creek twists its way out toward Lake Ontario, and across the street stands the luxurious Inn on the Twenty, the brainchild of Pennachetti's wife, Helen Young, and the best home base for visitors intent on exploring Niagara's western reaches. At the other end of the spectrum is Daniel Lenko's operation. His retail store, for example, is located in his mother's kitchen. The last time I was there, buying a case of his juicy, elegant Chardonnay, I also left with her recipe for apple pie.

Wine is the heart and soul of the region's appeal, and, almost without exception, the best bottlings can only be found by visiting the wineries. A flurry of exceptional vintages



(1998, 1999, 2002) proved that Ontario could make deep, rich reds as well as crisp whites (thank you, global warming), while the ever-reliable Canadian winter ensures an annual supply of ice wine. Pressed in the coldest months from grapes left to shrivel and then freeze on the vine, the intense, complex, tangy, supersweet elixir first put Ontario on the world's wine map in 1991, when Inniskillin's 1989 Vidal Icewine won the Grand Prix at Vinexpo, in France.

Fans of the golden dessert drink flock to Niagara in the New Year for the annual Icewine Festival, but that is only one of many such gatherings. In the high summer and fall, it's hard to find a weekend that isn't busy with some kind of oenocentric fiesta. Meanwhile, the larger wineries compete with one another, offering alfresco jazz, Shakespeare, or culinary events, along with the gamut of vineyard tours, hayrides, and barbecues. Itineraries are available at farm-gate and roadside fruit stands and at every stop on the Wine Route, the meandering road that links most of the region's wineries.

First-time visitors are advised to follow the route, though even old Niagara hands run into trouble in its middle section, where the college town of St. Catharines splits the region in two. I always seem to lose track of the helpful blue road signs as I enter the suburbs, ending up too far south, beyond the frontiers of wine country. Which isn't such a bad thing. The countryside around Pelham, Effingham, and the Short Hills Provincial Park is as beautiful as the Cotswolds in England, with rolling hills and deep combs, horse farms, antiques shops, and unexpected tearooms. (Sometimes I wonder whether my wife hasn't engineered these "accidental" detours.)

The last time we found ourselves aimlessly driving the winding roads of St. Catharines, we happened upon the Henry of Pelham winery. Its president, Paul Speck, led us from his office, situated in a handsome 1842 building that once served as an inn, to the edge of one of the vineyards, half shouting to be heard over the roar of a tractor driven by his younger brother Matthew. In 1984, the Speck family was living in Toronto when his father, Paul Sr., decided to throw his hat into the world of wine and plant vineyards on family land in St. Catharines. With no experience of growing grapes (or making wine, for that matter), he shuttled his three young sons—Speck, the oldest, was just 17—down to the family land every weekend to plant.

"For years, while we were sitting out there toiling away in the ninety-degree heat, I was hoping the vines were going to grow bottles of beer," Speck said, surveying his field with a smile. How things have changed: Today, Speck is an outspoken advocate of Canadian wines and even serves as vice chairman of Ontario's wine overlord, the Vintners Quality Alliance.

West of St. Catharines, the Niagara Escarpment, a great gray curtain of cliffs and wild woodland that is the wine country's dramatic backdrop, draws closer and closer to the lake, squeezing Niagara's many elements together. The lakeshore itself is a wasted asset behind the six-lane barrier of the highway and its attendant light industry. At this point along the Wine Route, villages seem to merge, the vineyards and orchards crowding together. But any feeling of claustrophobia vanishes when you turn south off the route and venture along the road that climbs away through the vine-covered benchlands and rises toward the escarpment. Suddenly, you're back in the depths of rural Ontario, pausing to buy cherries from the end of a farmer's driveway or to taste the first vintage of a new winery not yet on the map. @