

On the Trail of *Terroir*

Discovering the Tastes of Prince Edward County

By Kym Wolfe

Prince Edward County (PEC), at the eastern end of Lake Ontario, is one of Ontario's newest wine destinations.

The 104.8-hectare almost-island is filled with vineyards, eateries, artists' studios and galleries, scenic vistas, farm markets, beaches, and hiking and biking trails — in short, all the ingredients needed for an interesting week-long or weekend getaway. The county is steeped in history, having been established in 1792 as a haven for United Empire Loyalists following the American Revolution, and much of the original architecture has been preserved. Many historic buildings have been converted to B&Bs, bistros, boutiques, wineries, and tasting rooms.

The county boasts more than two dozen wineries, which range in size from two to fifty acres. Local winegrowers say there is a unique terroir here, in part because many of the vineyards are sitting on a broad limestone plateau. "The county produces the best quality of wine

because the roots have to work hard to get to the water table," say Brian Hanna, the sommelier at Huff Estate Wineries.

Hanna has worked with wines for 47 years, and one thing he has noticed since coming to PEC is that "all the wineries in this area are making dramatically different products."

The county is on the same latitude as northern France, Germany and Austria, but historically couldn't grow the grapevines found in those wine regions because any new growth wouldn't survive the harsh Canadian winters. Winegrowers here began experimenting in the early 1990s and pioneered a technique that has enabled them to grow Chardonnay, Pinot and other traditionally

European vines.

"The trunks are only six inches high, and we bury all the exposed shoots in earth to keep them from freezing over the winter," explains Lynn Sullivan of Rosehall Run Vineyards. "In the spring we uncover them by hand. It's very labour intensive."

Lynn and her husband Dan planted their first vines in 2001, and by 2005 had produced their first award-winning wines, landing four medals at the 2007 Artevino County Wine competition, including gold for their 2005 Chardonnay. "Prince Edward County wines have a distinctive taste," says Lynn. "The soil is only about an inch deep, with solid limestone underneath. The grapevines are rooted in the limestone and pull the mineral taste from it."

We visited two other wineries during our brief visit to PEC — the County Cider Company and The Grange of Prince Edward. The County Cider Company is a family-operated estate winery specializing in hard

Lynn Sullivan in the Rosehall Run vineyards



Doreen Pendracs in the Huff tasting room.



Sommelier Brian Hanna, at Huff Estate Wineries.



Paul Beedham at the door to the County Cider Company

ciders. Because it was a wet and dreary day, we weren't able to linger and enjoy the view from the patio that overlooks Lake Ontario, but we did enjoy the cozy atmosphere inside the 1832 stone barn, where the tasting room and retail store are located. I particularly enjoyed their ice cider, which has a lovely fruit flavour and is less intense than icewine.

The Grange is owned by Bob Granger and his daughter Caroline. The tasting room, situated in a refurbished 1826 Loyalist barn, is a pleasure to both the eyes and palate. One of the locals described it as

A refurbished Loyalist barn houses The Grange of Prince Edward's tasting room and retail store

"the prettiest winery in the county." While the winery's Cabernet Franc has won more awards, Caroline told us she takes a personal pride in the Trumpour's Mill Rosé. "I argued that we needed a rosé," she says, so she pushed through and created her first batch in 2003, and it remains one of her favourites. "It is only available for a short period of time. We release it on the May long weekend, and it is usually sold out in August."

We also tasted wines from Black Prince Winery during dinner at Milford Bistro & Gallery. The delicious 2008 Cabernet Franc, with its chocolaty overtones, was recommended by our chef and the bistro owner;





Milford's original general store, transformed into a cozy bistro

Chris Pengali. The bistro is located in a charming old building that started its life as the village general store. Pengali has retained the original store shelving and plank floor and created an intimate dining experience with a menu that, as much as possible, features locally sourced foods. "Our most popular menu items are the local lamb and free-range chicken," says Pengali. "And the vegetables! Vickie's Veggies must have more than a hundred types of tomatoes. In the summer it's a dream." Cherryvale Organic Farm is another favoured supplier, and Pengali says that working the fields there is almost a rite of passage for staff in PEC eateries. "Almost all staff working in local restaurants have worked at Cherryvale."

Most dining establishments here take pride in serving local cheeses as well. We visited Fifth Town Artisan Cheese Company, a niche producer of handmade goat and sheep milk cheeses, and Canada's only LEED certified dairy. Founder Petra Cooper spent four years

researching, planning, and building before the dairy produced its first batch of cheese in July 2008. A scant two years later, the company has captured more than a dozen awards for its cheeses, particularly its signature Cape Vessey goat cheese. Fifth Town is the only cheese maker in Ontario that produces cave-aged cheese, and visitors can take a peek into the caves through the viewing windows. The staff has also experimented with some unique wine-washed cheeses, but master cheese maker Stephanie Diamant says these are more one-off creations and not yet a regular part of their product listing.

A wide range of accommodation is available in PEC, from an inexpensive campsite along the white beaches of Sandbanks Provincial Park,

to the upscale inns and healing centres. We stayed at the inn at Huff Estates Wineries. Each room has a private patio, the perfect place to enjoy a late-night glass of award-winning wine (the 2007 Reisling Off-Dry is among the best I've tasted). Lanny Huff is the only PEC winery owner who was born in the county, but he did not choose an architectural style to mirror the county's historic roots. Instead, the



Andrew Laliberte delves into the art of cheesemaking at Fifth Town Artisan Cheese Company

well-appointed inn is concrete and steel and incorporates west-coast design elements.

If you're interested in works by local artisans, there are a number of galleries sprinkled throughout PEC, and you can also find their paintings, stained glass and other pieces showcased in local eateries. On the Huff Estates grounds, between the winery and the inn, is the Oeno Gallery, which features contemporary Canadian art, including some unique outdoor sculptures that can be found right up to the edge of the vineyard.

One of the pleasures of travelling in Prince Edward County is seeing how the different elements of the county feed into the overall experience. There is no blatant commercialism, but more a genuine feeling that the winemakers, chefs, artists and other residents are welcoming you to experience a bit of their relaxed way of life. As one of my travelling companions, Doreen Pendgracs, commented, "The pride here is very high, and I'm sensing a real level of passion for what they do. They all support one another and they have maintained an authentic rural feel."

If you're planning a visit, be sure to check



Outdoor sculpture at Oeno Gallery

out <http://tastethecounty.ca>. The locals have staked out both a Taste Trail that highlights places to eat and drink (www.tastetrail.ca), and an Arts Trail populated by a variety of artists and galleries (www.artstrail.ca).

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