



**VINE ROUTES**  
**NIAGARA'S WINE**  
**COUNTRY IS ROOTED**  
**IN A LOT MORE THAN**  
**JUST SOIL**  
 BY MELISSA SILVA

Looking out of the car window on an early overcast summer morning, all that is visible is an endless mass of greenery and earth, an aggressive shock to veteran urban eyes. Quiet, almost ominous, there is not much to see nor hear, but the richness of colour that makes up the only surroundings almost begs to differ, enticing me to explore further.

A drive along the Niagara Peninsula in late August is capable of creating a desolate yet calming aura. Aside from the residual echo of bird bangers and the rustling of various feathered flyers, there is not much that disturbs a visitor in Ontario's Niagara region.

With nothing but vineyards and winding roads for miles, solitude is, ironically, your only companion. But to tour even a handful of the region's more than 80 vineyards will uncover the very opposite; a togetherness of families from lengthy lineages following traditions of collective dedication to the earth and vine will greet you at every stop.

With soil that is rich in limestone, it's easy to understand why many of these vineyards were once farms — many of which are still in existence — while others have been converted into “multi-purpose” wineries, so to speak.

Making my way into Beamsville, a community in the town of Lincoln located between Lake Ontario and the Niagara Escarpment, I stop off at Nicolette Novak's own multi-purpose Good Earth Food and Wine Co. After deciding to take on her father's peach farm, Novak opened her own cooking school on the premises, the entirety of which has now become quite multi-faceted: A farm, a cooking school, a garden, a vineyard and an orchard are what make up this “food-first winery.” Touring the school's quaint, pesticide-free garden, accompanied by the winery's food alchemist Patrick Engel, turns into a pick-and-eat tour: Mouse melons, sweet pea tomatoes and nasturtiums (edible flowers), to name a few, are all on the menu.

Good Earth's reputation in wine country is one of duality; in addition to hand-pruning their Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc and Riesling vines, this winery is equally invested in producing fresh, “farm-to-table” complementary dishes. It's no wonder they even altered “locus delicti,” Italian for “scene of the crime,” to create their own motto, “Locus Delecti.”

PHOTOS BY: ADELA AHMAD

 Criminology aside, wine country lends itself to another area of study — biodynamic methodology. Entering the lower region of the Niagara Escarpment I stop off at the highly accredited, technologically advanced and environmentally conscious Tawse Winery. As I walk through the vast vineyard with winery manager Brad Gowland, past the winery’s resident lambs — used to graze the bottom of the vines to expose the grapes to more sunlight—I learn that Tawse uses natural gravity and geothermic energy to produce its wines, including Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, both of which the winery is widely known for. Lending from the principles of Rudolph Steiner, Tawse believes in using as much as possible from the land in the most harmonious of fashions, without interrupting any natural processes. This belief stems from Steiner’s practice of using the moon cycle and the earth to help with the development of farming.

During my walk I literally stumble upon one method for maintaining the health of the winery’s biodynamic vineyards — rose bushes. Highly susceptible to mould and mildew, rose bushes serve as an excellent indicator of the health of grape vines. Because Tawse uses a combination of stinging nettle and willow (natural substances) to spray the vines instead of chemical-ridden pesticides, I am able to pick grapes — though not fully ripe — right off the vines for a snack while we walk.

I soon come to learn that Steiner’s influence is quite widespread throughout Niagara, extending to Niagara-on-the-Lake, where I visit Southbrook Vineyards. Appearing almost like a modern art gallery, the streamlined, modern-design building takes me off guard as I pull up the characteristically long driveway to the winery. It is here that I learn much more about Steiner and his respect for the land, a kind of respect that I am beginning to realize is a significant component of the operation of many wineries in the Niagara region.

It isn’t long after my arrival that I am greeted by Southbrook’s Bill Redelmeier. “Plants are better when they have to search for food in the ground,” he soon explains, then delves right into Steiner’s philosophy — Southbrook’s underlying foundation — which, luckily, I just learned at Tawse. “What you drink when you drink our wine,” Redelmeier shares, “is the rain, the soil and the winemaker’s art.”

In addition to their wine, which is made by following the principles of organic agriculture and consists of six “families” including Chardonnays, Cabernet Francs,

Sauvignons and Merlots, even the modernly constructed winery itself harks back to Steiner’s respect for the earth. Designed by Toronto-based architecture firm Diamond and Schmitt, the winery was constructed with a floating roof, with the intention it would appear to be floating gently on the land, not aggressively and disrespectfully penetrating the earth. LEED Gold-certified, the winery is green throughout. From its wetland treatment system, to the white reflective PVC roof, to the bicycle racks outside, it is easy to see how the building itself renders this winery unique.

Before it is my time to depart wine country, I have one last stop. Obscured from the main road I am travelling and up a winding path, tucked in behind forestry, stands Hidden Bench Vineyards and Winery. Located within the Beamsville Bench VQA sub-appellation and literally hidden from road view, Hidden Bench artisanal winery consists of three vineyards: Locust Lane, Felseck and Rosomel. Rosomel, the oldest, is over 30 years old and home to some of

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the oldest vines in Niagara. Hidden Bench vineyards are composed of 53 per cent Pinot Noir, 26 per cent Chardonnay, and eight per cent Riesling, and the winery uses only French oak barrels to ferment their wines, save for the few stainless steel barrels used for smaller amounts of wine fermenting. In addition, as is becoming the common denominator among Niagara wineries, Hidden Bench’s winery uses geothermal energy for heating and cooling, rendering their practice highly sustainable.

After leaving the farmhouse on Locust Lane, which was built in 1860 and is now used for wine sales and tastings, I head with Hidden Bench’s Meg McGrath to explore the vineyards where I am introduced to the “girls” — the vineyard’s resident chickens.

Not only useful for fresh eggs, McGrath explains that chickens are chiefly used at Hidden Bench to break up the soil and dirt, as the structure of their feet — much like the hooves of horses — is crucial for enriching the vineyard’s soil. In addition, with the chickens eating insects and naturally fertilizing the soil, the need for pesticides — which Hidden Bench doesn’t use — becomes further eradicated.

RECOMMENDED WINERIES

**ROSEWOOD ESTATES WINERY & MEADERY**  
**Beamsville**  
 Beekeepers for over 70 years, the Romans are the sole producers of honey wine in Niagara with 15 acres of planted vineyard.  
 » [rosewoodwine.com](http://rosewoodwine.com)

**FIELDING ESTATE WINERY**  
**Beamsville**  
 Fielding Estate Winery offers a unique Ontario cottage country feel with their cedar, stone and glass “wine lodge.”  
 » [fieldingwines.com](http://fieldingwines.com)


**CAVE SPRING CELLARS**  
**Jordan**  
 Housed in a historic building circa 1871, Cave Spring is home to the province’s oldest functioning wine cellars.  
 » [cavespringcellars.com](http://cavespringcellars.com)

**VINELAND ESTATES WINERY**  
**Vineland**  
 Vineland Estates was founded by German Herman Weis. He planted vinifera vines as well as a Riesling vine still used.  
 » [vineland.com](http://vineland.com)

**COLANERI ESTATE WINERY**  
**Niagara-on-the-Lake**  
 Colaneri Estate Winery is run by the sons and families of Joseph Colaneri and his wife, Maria, who came from Italy in 1967.  
 » [colaneriwines.com](http://colaneriwines.com)

**PILLITTERI ESTATES WINERY**  
**Niagara-on-the-Lake**  
 The world’s largest estate producer of icewine, Pillitteri makes 14 different styles.  
 » [pillitteri.com](http://pillitteri.com)

The time has now come to depart wine country. There is something to miss about this place, chiefly its wine, but also its tranquility. The wine is one aspect, and a key aspect at that, but the tranquil space, the peaceful partnership between human and land that exists here, is not something you find in the bustling city. As I leave, I am left with a more acute awareness of my natural surroundings, of the earth that I coexist with. If touring Niagara taught me anything — aside from the difference between an oaked and unoaked Chardonnay — it reconfirmed a very real relationship between myself and my natural roots. Wine making is a flavourful, creative and artistic expression of that relationship, and even though I depart with my vitis vinifera fill, I leave thirsty for the earth. ■

 For more photos of the Niagara region go to [lifestylemag.com](http://lifestylemag.com)

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