

The New Generation of CANADIAN WINEMAKERS

After years of being given the cold shoulder, the Canadian wine scene is now effervescent with possibilities—and we're not just talking about pét-nat.

By STEPHANIE MERCIER VOYER

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UICK: What's the first thing that comes to mind when you're asked about Canadian wine? If your answer is something vague about icewine or a rustic B.C. Cabernet, you're not alone. But the times are changing, and Canada is swiftly becoming one of the most exciting places for natural wines and forward-thinking winemakers in North America. Whether they're working to shift people's biases one grape at a time, inspiring a grassroots winemaking movement or experimenting abroad to please the taste buds of people back home, these winemakers are helping Canadian wine lovers see that their glass is way more than half full.

TRAIL ESTATE IS REDEFINING ONTARIO WINES

"People have thought for a long time that Ontario wine isn't good," says Mackenzie Brisbois, the winemaker at Trail Estate, a small-batch winery tucked away in quiet Prince Edward County, on the north shore of Lake Ontario. "It's just not true."

Before landing the winemaker position at Trail Estate, Brisbois studied viticulture and winemaking at Niagara College and honed her craft working around the world, falling deeper in love with fermented grape juice. She was attracted to the industry because it combined many of her interests, including agriculture, chemistry and hospitality. "I like doing lots and lots of stuff, and winemaking is kind of a renaissance-style career," she says.

When she arrived at Trail Estate, her goal was to help define the winery's identity. "They were making good wines but nothing exciting—nothing that differentiated them from anywhere else," she says. Brisbois set out to change that and divided the wine production into two different styles. She stuck with European varietals like Chardonnay, Cabernet Franc and Pinot Noir, treating them in a very classic style with natural fermentation, a bit of oak and no filtration. And she took a risk by producing wines that defied people's expectations of Ontario, including quirky pét-nats (naturally sparkling wines), juicy skin-contact wines, piquettes (wines made from grape pomace) and even a

cuvée made with Concord grapes (Supersonic), a variety traditionally reserved for jams and juices. "I just wanted to see what we could make with these grapes that have been shunned from winemaking," she says. "It's like you're drinking juice with a bit of booze." In order to differentiate the two lines, the classic-style wines kept their more serious labels while the new wines were stamped with bright and colourful designs.

Breathing new life into the winery's cellar paid off. The 2019 vintage of Brisbois' Supersonic sold out rapidly, and so did her Orange Nouveau, a highly drinkable blend of Pinot Gris, Gewürztraminer, Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc and Muscat. But she notes that while Montrealers are usually quick to jump on her new releases of skin-contact wines, Torontonians seem to trail a bit behind. "It's really interesting because I think Quebec does a really good job of supporting Quebec wineries," she says. "I feel like in Ontario, we almost need an outside critic to say that Ontario is amazing. If the creativity and playfulness at Trail Estate are any indication of the kind of wines that can come out of the province, I think we can all safely start singing its praises."

REVERSE-ENGINEERING THE DREAM WITH A SUNDAY IN AUGUST

Sometimes a life goal will dictate your path. This was the case for husband-and-wife team Mike Shindler and Sam Milbrath when they decided to launch their natural winery, A Sunday in August, in 2017. "We've always been into food and wine, but a big part of it was that we wanted to figure out a way to live in a rural setting," says Shindler.

When they were starting out, Shindler and Milbrath were told they would need about \$2 million. Investing that kind of money was impossible for the couple, but they remained determined to make it work by going grassroots. They got in >

A Sunday in August's Mike Shindler and Sam Milbrath



PHOTOGRAPHY: STOCKSY (MAIN IMAGE) & GUY FERGUSON (M. SHINDLER & S. MILBRATH)

touch with organic-grape growers, rented a car to pick up the goods in the Okanagan Valley, brought them back to Vancouver, where they currently live, and made their first vintage in their bike shed using a 400-litre tank borrowed from a friend. “The wine was absolutely terrible,” says Shindler.

After that first experiment, he started calling winemakers he admired across Canada to ask them questions. He picked up some skills working at a few B.C. wineries, and eventually, Jay Drisdale from Bella Wines in Naramata, B.C., took Shindler under his wing. “He said, ‘Write a really detailed list of how you want these wines to taste—it’ll never totally go that way, but at least then you’ll know what you’re trying to attain,’” says Shindler.

From there, Shindler and Milbrath started building relationships with growers, rented a proper winemaking facility (so long, bike shed!) and worked on developing their brand. “When Mike came up with [the name] A Sunday in August, he wanted to borrow a feeling—a nice summery feeling that is approachable,” says Milbrath, who handles the marketing side of things. Milbrath commissioned young female Canadian artists to create artwork—including lively floral-filled pieces by her sisters, painters Darby and Claire Milbrath—that would convey the idea that wine shouldn’t be intimidating.

Now, four years into the venture, the couple transforms a range of grape varietals like Gewürztraminer, Pinot Gris and Cabernet Franc into 13 fresh and zippy pét-nats, piquettes, rosés and orange, white and red wines. Even though Shindler and Milbrath are working toward buying their own vineyard, their wines have become so popular that they’ve already sold out their yearly wine club, which they use to finance packaging and bottling each year after spending all their capital on grapes. But don’t fret—if you missed out on this year’s wine club, A Sunday in August bottles are available through the brand’s website and in select restaurants and shops across Canada.

WEIN GOUTTE IS A LABOUR OF LOVE

Emily Campeau’s love of wine keeps on growing. Born in Quebec, she has been the wine director at Restaurant Candide in Montreal since 2016, has written about wine for various publications and is now making wine in Germany—where she currently lives with her husband, Christoph Müller—under the label Wein Goutte. Its name a play on words—the German term for winery is “Weingut” and the French word for drop is “goutte”—Wein Goutte was born out of two people’s love for wine and each other.

When she first started working at Candide, Campeau made sure she would always have the freedom to continue expanding her wine knowledge. “I really wanted to learn about vineyard practices—but for real, not from a book,” she says. Each year, chef and owner John Winter Russell would let Campeau take time off to explore different wine regions and take part in harvests in places like Germany and California. But it wasn’t until 2018, when she worked at a winery in Austria, that her life changed forever. There, she met Müller, the winery’s cellar master, who would soon become her husband. With the permission of the winemaker they worked for, the couple started crafting their own wines under the label Wein Goutte. Having worked in kitchens before reorienting her career to wine, Campeau immediately felt at home in the cellar. “It has



Wein Goutte’s Emily Campeau and Christoph Müller

“WE MADE ABOUT 5,000 BOTTLES FOR OUR FIRST VINTAGE, AND THEY WERE ALL SOLD OUT BEFORE WE EVEN TALKED ABOUT IT.”

a bit of the same feeling as being in a kitchen,” she says. “It’s less stressful, but it’s also physical, and you’re thinking about multiple things at once.”

The response to Wein Goutte’s first offering of wines, vermouths and ciders was overwhelming. The playful wines, whose bottles are adorned with witty sticker-like illustrations by Montrealer Simon Roy, garnered attention from buyers around the world, from Canada to Sweden, Denmark and the U.K. “We made about 5,000 bottles for our first vintage, and they were all sold out before we even talked about it,” says Campeau.

Recently, the couple relocated to an estate in the small German village of Hüttenheim, where they tend to lesser-known grape varietals like Johanniter, Regent and Domina. And while they are constantly learning and growing as winemakers, being able to adapt to whatever life throws at them has always been their plan. Campeau just never imagined that her journey to putting wine on the tables of Canadian restaurants would take her all the way to Germany. Keep your eyes peeled because Wein Goutte’s next release is sure to sell out in a blink. ■