

Ontario Wine Review: *Is Chardonnay Cool Again?*

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On Sunday January 31st, I was called to duty with 7 other judges to help select Ontario's best Chardonnays to represent this province at Canada House and at the London International Wine Fair in England.

Now, I can almost feel a collective head scratching: What happened to all the talk about Riesling, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Franc? Since when did Chardonnay become the grape to represent Ontario? If you ask that question to Southbrook owner Bill Redelmeier he'd tell you it started for him while driving back to Toronto, when he heard Le Clos Jordanne winemaker,

Thomas Bachelder, talking on the radio regarding Le Clos' surprising win at the Judgment of Montreal. For those not familiar with this event, allow me to fill you in: Back in May of 2009, a tasting was held for 10 respected wine critics and judges, described as "a who's who of Quebec wine writers", in Montreal, Quebec. It was a pseudo-recreation of the 1976 Judgment of Paris, which saw the then upstart wine region of California beat out first growth Bordeaux and Burgundies in a tasting of Cabernets and Chardonnays respectively. The only difference this time, in Montreal, a "ringer" was thrown in, a bottle of Canadian Chardonnay from the Ontario winery Le Clos Jordanne (2005 Claystone Terrace), even more surprising, they won. This caused quite an uproar on this side of the border and began a little rippling of the waters for Canadian wine; not enough for the world to notice (as in Paris), but enough to cause a stir nonetheless.

During Thomas' interview on CBC Radio about the improbable win, he stated that Le Clos was lucky to win because they had just been included and that any number of Ontario Chardonnays could have done the same thing. This got Redelmeier thinking, "Could that in fact be true?" His conclusion was a resounding "yes".

Southbrook has been making Chardonnay since the winery's inception in 1991. Back then, Redelmeier, along with his winemaker Derek Barnett crafted Chardonnays that were meant for their cellar – both being fans of the great Burgundian whites. Chardonnay is the most widely planted white grape in Ontario and, as such, is the wine made by most of Ontario's wineries. Thomas, unbeknownst to him, had given Bill an idea. Just like the sips and slurps heard round the world in '76, Bill devised a plan to put Ontario Chardonnay front and center in the 'center of the universe' when it comes to fine wines:
London, England.

The only problem Bill is a producer, so he couldn't very well just unilaterally choose his own wines to represent Ontario. For that matter, he couldn't just pick his favourites either he needed help. So with the aid of one of Ontario's most sought after wine competition planners (Sadie Darby), he put out the call for wines and researched judges. The wines entered were a secret to all but Sadie, the judges were a matter of record. Headed by Tony Aspler along with Konrad Ejbich, John Szabo, Linda Bramble, David Lawrason, Steven Elphick, Gord Stimmell, and myself (Michael Pinkus) – kind of ironic for me to be there since Chardonnay is one of my least favourite grapes – so as you could imagine, my scores were lower than my counterparts – but Bill needed lovers and haters of the grape to prove its viability and inclusion in the travel plans to Europe.

We met on a Sunday at the Summerhill LCBO in Toronto. The wines were tasted in 5 flights: 2008, 2007, 2006/2005, Unoaked and library wines (not necessarily in that order) – all wines, except for the library ones, had to be commercially available.

Now the tasting is over. The scores have been tabulated and we have 34 wines from 19 wineries going to England to represent Ontario's finest. Bill refers to these as "Cool Climate Chardonnay", because Ontario is all about Cool Climate, big natural acidity and nice fruit – different from our winemaking counterparts to the south who deliver warm weather Chardonnay with oak to spare and added acidity.

On May 17, our Chardonnays, some of our winemakers and owners and (Sir) Tony Aspler himself will travel to London to showcase Ontario's Cool Climate Chardonnays. In a tribute to this effort over the next 5 newsletters (including this one), I will be showcasing my own favourites from the 5 flights tasted. You can find out more about the tasting at coolchardonnay.ca or you can make up your own mind on the winning wines by attending the [Ontario Wine Society's Cool Chardonnay Tasting on March 24](#).

As many of you know, I champion Cabernet Franc as Ontario's grape – I still do and will, but anything that gets our 100% VQA Ontario wines in front of a world audience, thus showing our industry in a positive light, I'm all for. Good luck in London gentlemen.