

## Seriously Cool Chardonnay - by John Szabo



John Szabo, MS

"Would you be proud to pour this to a group of international wine writers as an example of Canadian wine?" This was the heavy question put to us by Southbrook owner Bill Redelmeier before we set about tasting our way through 65 VQA chardonnays, all from Ontario. Redelmeier is the man behind a new cool climate chardonnay initiative, whose (mostly) altruistic goal is to bring some recognition on the international stage to what he and many others consider to be Ontario's most successful grape, chardonnay.

The idea was sparked last year when Redelmeier overheard the philosopher-winemaker Thomas Bachelder of Le Clos Jordanne on the CBC. Bachelder was discussing Le Clos' triumph at an international tasting of chardonnays in Montreal, in which one of his wines finished in top spot, besting some serious competition. "I recall him saying that he was really just lucky, since on the day any one of a dozen local chardonnays could have done the same. He said Ontario makes great cool climate chardonnay. I agree. We do make world class, cool climate chardonnay." Redelmeier continues: "New Zealand built its reputation on a single variety, and one region. I am hoping to do the same... to launch Chardonnay on the world scene should earn respect for Canadian wine in general. What I am hoping to gain internationally is the acceptance that we make more than Icewine".

According to the Vintner's Quality Alliance, of the 114 wineries currently making VQA wines in the Ontario, about 100 of them produce at least one chardonnay. Indeed, it's the variety with the greatest number of VQA approvals accounting for nearly half (46%) of all VQA white wines. That's clear evidence local winegrowers consider chardonnay a highly suitable, or at least commercially important grape. So Redelmeier invited all eligible wineries to submit wines in a competition to select the best chardonnays in the province. A panel of experienced Wine Writers' Circle of Canada judges was convened, including Tony Aspler, David Lawrason, Gord Stimell, Linda Bramble, Micheal Pinkus, Steve Elphic, Konrad Ejbich and yours truly. A total of 65 wines were submitted. Flights were divided into unoaked (5 wines), 2008 vintage (17 wines), 2007 vintage (27), 2006 & 2005 (9), and a final 'Library wines' flight including 6 wines from 1998 to 2004. The judges were asked to score the wines out of 100 points, and also include a checkmark of approval if we believed the wines to be representative of what Ontario can do. (For the record, logistics and nothing else made it impossible to include 100% locally grown wines from other provinces). Generic "VQA Ontario" wines were discouraged in favour of appellation-specific wines, and all 10 Niagara sub-appellations and all four officially approved VQA regions were represented, perhaps for the first time ever in a single tasting of one grape variety.

In the end 35 wines were deemed suitable to carry the Canadian flag. These wines will be presented at a tasting to the trade on the eve of the London International Wine and Spirits Fair on May 17<sup>th</sup> 2010. Fittingly, the tasting will be held at Canada House, and the crème de la crème of UK and international critics will be invited to attend. A little closer to home, the Ontario Wine Society is presenting all of the London-bound wines on March 24th. This event will be open to the public. Go to <http://www.ontariowinesociety.com/> to register.

In a final moment of guilelessness, Redelmeier reveals a little piece of Canadian character. “We as Canadians give much more respect to a product when it is accepted abroad.” Well, maybe this is our chance to shed our vinous insecurities.

Below are my personal picks of the competition – note that not all of these will be London-bound as, somewhat controversially, each winery was limited to sending only two wines. That means that a winery with 3, 4 or more wines that would have qualified based on score would have had to choose only 2 wines to send. All of the wines and details can be eventually found at [www.coolchardonnay.ca](http://www.coolchardonnay.ca)

2006 CEV Chardonnay, Colio, Lake Erie North Shore \$15.35

2007 Colio Unoaked Chardonnay, Coyote’s Run, Niagara \$14.95

2008 Chardonnay Musqué, Château des Charmes, Niagara \$16.95

2006 Tête de Cuvée Chardonnay, Hidden Bench, Beamsville \$45

2006 Chardonnay LCJ Vineyard, Le Clos Jordanne, Niagara \$45

2007 Chardonnay Robyn’s Block, Tawse, Beamsville \$42

2007 Chardonnay Quarry Road Vineyard, Tawse, Beamsville \$35

2007 & 2008 Signature Series Chardonnay Sur Lie, Peller Estates, Niagara \$30

2007 Lailey Vineyard Old Vines Chardonnay, Lailey, Niagara \$40

2007 Barrel Fermented Chardonnay, Henry of Pelham, Niagara Escarpment \$19.95

2007 & 2008 Estate Chardonnay, Hidden Bench, Beamsville, \$35

2007 Chardonnay Talon Ridge, Le Clos Jordanne, Vinemount Ridge \$45

2007 South Bay Vineyards Chardonnay, Huff Estates, Prince Edward County \$29.95

2008 The Rusty Shed Chardonnay, Flat Rock Cellars, Niagara \$24.95

2008 Triomphe Chardonnay (Organic), Southbrook, Niagara \$21.95

2008 Chardonnay Rowan Vineyard, Ravine Estate, Niagara \$24

2008 Black Paw Vineyard Chardonnay, Coyote's Run, Niagara \$22

2008 Chardonnay Cuvée County, Rosehall Run Cellars, Prince Edward County \$17.95

2003 Vintners Private Reserve Chardonnay, Peninsula Ridge, Niagara \$N/A

2003 Chardonnay CVS, Cave Spring Cellars, Niagara \$30

1998 Poetica Chardonnay, Southbrook, Niagara \$154/1.5l