

## Keeping watch over Niagara's vineyards

By Monique Beech, St. Catharines Standard  
Posted Sept. 4, 2010

As the old adage goes, great wine starts in the vineyard. A perfect blend of proper vine maintenance coupled with the kindness of Mother Nature all lead to that magical harvest day when grapes reach that optimal mix of sweetness and acidity.

That's where Jim Willwerth, a viticulturist with Brock University's grape and wine institute, comes in.

For the past few weeks, the Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute staffer has been out at four Niagara vineyards -- two east of the Welland Canal, and two west -- to take samples of the region's most common Europeanbred wine grape varieties:

Chardonnay, Riesling, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Berry bunches are taken once a week and brought to the wine institute's new analytical services lab to test for sugar and various acids. Results are posted on CCOVI's website.

Willwerth's goal is to help guide growers in the sometimes daunting task of picking that perfect harvest day. This is the first time CCOVI has provided any sampling services at harvest time.

With a hot, sunny summer and good doses of rain -- harvest is about three weeks ahead of schedule this year -- picking of some wine grapes, particularly those used in sparkling wine, started in Niagara last week.

"Just like any other important wine-growing region in the world, there's a huge variation in climate from year to year that impacts vine performance and has implications on how the grapes are maturing," Willwerth said.

"Vines develop at different rates and therefore fruit develops also at different rates. The difference, for example, from last year to this year is we're many weeks ahead."

There's also significant differences in how fast grapes will grow at vineyard sites across Niagara.

While Willwerth would not reveal where his test sites are, he said they highlight the geographical differences and vineyard management practices in Niagara's wine region.

"It's important to monitor how fruit is developing across the region, because there's a lot of variation across Niagara and Lake Erie north shore. There's a lot of different terroirs. At different sites, the grapes will develop at different times and rates."

Results are available online at [brocku.ca/ccovi](http://brocku.ca/ccovi).

Samples will be taken until harvest is complete. Willwerth said he plans to continue collecting data in the future years to study trends in grape maturation.