

# ARTS & LIFE

## A master class on wine tasting



**JOHN MCTAVISH**  
OPINION

On a warm June day more than 100 of Ontario's top wine professionals gathered at Brock University's Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute in St. Catharines.

They're there for one purpose: to taste, to learn and to sharpen the skills that will carry Niagara wine to the next level.

The occasion was the annual Experts Tasting and this year the subject was Chardonnay, one of the world's most complex and debated white grapes.

And increasingly, Chardonnay is one of Niagara's most exciting success stories.

What unfolded during the course of the day was not simply a tasting. It was a master-class and a vivid example of why Brock University has emerged as one of the most proactive voices in Canadian wine education.

It champions Ontario wine, with a reach and ambition that extends well beyond the classroom.

### Five flights, one master-class

The event was structured around five carefully curated flights, each designed to peel back a different layer of what makes Chardonnay one of winemaking's most fascinating canvases.

The first flight explored the spectrum of wine aging, from stainless steel to oak barrel. It presented seven Chardonnays that ranged from bright and unoaked to rich and deeply barrel influenced.

Guests swirled, sniffed and sipped their way through examples of wine fermented entirely in stainless steel, combinations of stainless and neutral oak, older barrels and brand-new French oak. Each barrel produces a wine of strikingly different character from the same grape. It was a vivid reminder in winemaking, the vessel is never neutral.

The second flight turned to geography, what the French call *terroir*.

Chardonnays from different sub-appellations across the Niagara Peninsula were poured side by side and each carried the fingerprint of its origin. Heavier clay soils produced rounder, more textural wines. Limestone-rich benchland sites delivered tighter, more mineral expressions.

For those in the room who spend days selling or serving Ontario wine, this flight was a revelation: Niagara is not one place. It is many.

The third flight examined the winemaker's hand, the deliberate decisions made in the cellar that shape a wine's final personality. Malolactic fermentation, lees stirring, battonage, extended barrel aging: each technique leaves its mark and this flight made those marks visible in the glass.

Flight four was perhaps the most thought-provoking: a vertical tasting spanned vintages from 2024 all the way back to 2000.

In a university classroom in Niagara, guests witnessed firsthand how Niagara Chardonnay ages: how primary fruit gives way to nutty, honeyed complexity over time and how the best examples hold their acidity like a backbone through

### Brock leads the charge for wine education and the industry is noticing



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From left, Barb Tatarnic, leader of the VQA Wines of Ontario Promotion program, with VQA award winners honoured at this year's Experts Tasting event at Brock. Second from left, Laurie Macdonald, Allison Vidug, Genevieve Piche and Antonia Mantonakis.



the decades.

The fifth and final flight was light in spirit: a blind quiz that challenged guests to identify wines by style, region and winemaking technique. It was a fitting close to a day of serious learning, a reminder that wine knowledge should always find its way back to pleasure.

### The school behind the glass

Brock's Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute (CCOVI) has been operating since 1996. In more than three decades, it has grown into a nationally recognized centre for wine research and sensory education. It has trained the next generation of winemakers, viticulturists, wine educators and sommeliers who will shape the Canadian wine industry for years to come.

What makes the Experts Tasting significant is not just the quality of the wines poured, it is the audience

**The Experts Tasting at Brock is an annual by-invitation-only event and is designed for guests who promote VQA wines through education and/or promotion.**

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invited to experience them.

Barb Tatarnic, leader of the VQA Wines of Ontario Promotion program and a key figure at Brock, explained the thinking behind the event clearly. "The significance of this tasting is really who is invited to attend," she said.

"We invite people who promote and educate on Ontario VQA wines: front-line LCBO staff, wine educators, hospitality professionals, sommeliers and wine media. We're trying to give them more tools in their tool box so that they can promote and educate anyone who walks into their tasting room, their restaurant or their store."

It is an elegant philosophy.

Rather than marketing directly to consumers, Brock invests in the people who reach consumers every day. Train the trainers. Arm the ambassadors. Let the knowledge ripple outward.

### A brigade of believers

The day also marked the presentation of the annual VQA Promoter Awards, recognition for individuals who have gone above and beyond in championing Ontario wines. This year's recipients spanned the full range of the industry.

In the Frontline Retail category, the award went to Allison Vidug, founder of At the Lake in Muskoka. The boutique shop has become a destination for visitors seeking the best of Ontario wine in a tourism-driven community far from the Niagara Peninsula. Her grassroots advocacy introduces VQA wines to visitors from across Canada and beyond who might never have sought them out on their own.

The Education Award honoured Antonia Mantonakis, a professor of marketing and consumer psychology at Brock's Goodman School of Business, who has integrated Ontario VQA wine into her MBA curriculum and presents her Niagara-rooted research on international stages.

In Hospitality, Genevieve Piché of Air Canada, was recognized for creating the airline's first all-Canadian wine list for its Signature Suites and Maple Leaf Lounges. Piché ensures hundreds of thousands of travellers annually encounter Ontario wine at its finest and travelled from Quebec City that morning to attend the event.

The Lifetime Achievement Award was presented to Laurie Macdonald, founding executive director of the Ontario Wine Appellation Authority. She retires at year's end after more than 25 years building the systems of trust and quality control Ontario VQA depends on. Her career has been dedicated to ensuring every bottle of Ontario wine earns the consumer's confidence.

### Ontario wine's moment

The timing of this year's event carries additional significance.

Ongoing trade tensions with the United States have prompted Canadian consumers to reconsider what they put in their glasses and Ontario wine has never been better positioned to fill that space.

For Tatarnic, the Experts Tasting is not just a response to that moment. It is the culmination of years of deliberate, ground-up effort. "We've given out over 80 VQA Promoter Awards in the last 20 years," she said.

"That brigade just keeps getting bigger and bigger. And they're out there doing the front-line hard work of promoting Ontario VQA wines every single day — whether it's in a tasting room, a restaurant, an airline lounge or a classroom. That is how you build a wine culture."

It is a long game and Brock has been playing it patiently. It has created the educators, trained the advocates and recognized the champions who carry Ontario wine forward.

On a day of beautiful Chardonnay and well-deserved recognition, it was easy to feel optimistic about where that work is headed.

The glass, in Niagara, has never looked more full.

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