

Squeezing the greatest potential out of Niagara's wine industry

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For years, Niagara's vineyards have been something of a grape smorgasbord.

Virtually everything can be found in the ground, from hot-loving grape varieties such as Shiraz to cool-hardy grapes such as Vidal, which are a hybrid, or cross, between a European variety and a native Canadian one.

This might change.

As part of its plan to strengthen the wine industry, the Ontario government asked wineries and grape growers this week to come up with a grape varietal plan for the

province by 2014.

The plan would chart a course for what grape varieties to put in the ground and how much.

So what to plant?

Take a look around the wine regions of the world and it's not hard to discover where the great grape strengths lie: California for its bold red grape variety Cabernet Sauvignon, New Zealand for its fragrant white Sauvignon Blanc and Argentina for its rich red Malbec.

What should Niagara's grape trump card be?

Based on Niagara's cold winters, short grape growing season and consumer taste, most experts agree the region should focus primarily on three varieties:

Riesling -- an aromatic white grape variety with historic roots in Germany.

Chardonnay -- a common white variety that's grown around the world, but particularly shines in cooler climates, such as Burgundy, France.

Pinot Noir -- the hard-to-grow grape variety associated with Burgundy and now Oregon.

Many wineries are already focusing on these Riesling and Chardonnay varieties, but viticulture expert Andrew Reynolds said even more could be planted in the region.

"These are varieties we do extremely well. They're reliable," said Reynolds, a Brock University biological sciences professor and researcher with the school's Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute.

"If we have a cold winter, those are going to be the last ones that are going to get hurt -- other than hybrids."

Beyond that, opinions vary on what to plant.

Some say red-grape Cabernet Franc is the way to go, while others pin their hopes on cool temperature-loving white grapes such as Pinot Gris, Gewurztraminer and Sauvignon Blanc.

Others champion Vidal -- currently the No. 1 grape grown in Niagara -- for its ability to be used in table wine and icewine, a dessert wine made of frozen grapes.

Either way, the industry needs to find some sort of grape direction, said Tony Shaw, a microclimatologist and Brock associate geography professor who studies soil and climate properties of vineyards.

"I think that's why we need to narrow the varieties that do best in this climate here," said Shaw, a fellow with the Cool Climate Oenology and Viticulture Institute.

"To me, climate is the No. 1 factor. If you're growing varieties in a climate that will not produce consistent quality, then we have a problem. The market wants consistency."

The jury is out on sun-loving grapes that need a lot of time to grow, such as Cabernet Sauvignon.

In some cold years, such as this one, it's tough to get these grape varieties ripe enough to produce good wine.

In hot years like 2007, the region made good Bordeaux blends, a mix primarily of Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Because of the challenges of growing red grapes, Reynolds said we have enough in Niagara and shouldn't plant anymore.

In the end, consumer taste will dictate what grapes go in the ground, said Donald Ziraldo, chairman of the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre.

In other Vines & Wine news:

Reif Estate Winery is having a sale on its red wines Oct. 29 to Nov. 1.

The Niagara-on-the-Lake winery is offering mark-downs on limited-edition and estate-bottled reds. The sale is once a year.

Visit www.reifwinery.com or

call 905-468-9463 for additional details.

Have news on the grape and wine industry to share?

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