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WINE CRITIC

It's no secret that the most premium Ontario wines rarely appear on LCBO shelves. Produced in tiny quantities, they often sell out to loyal subscribers at the winery, sometimes in days. Vintages managed to corral four Stratus wines in this release, long sold out at the winery. My top value pick is its second-label white, Wildass, reviewed below. Stratus winemaker J.L. Groux blends seven or more varieties into his whites and reds, often producing stellar results.

But my pick as top Ontario white of the year is from Hidden Bench Winery, 2006 Nuit Blanche Rosomel Vineyard (\$40), a blend of sauvignon blanc and sémillon grapes that delivers exotic aromas of citronella, limestone, grapefruit and tangerine zest with a finish that hints of honeyed apricot. An amazing white, rating 94/100, only available at the winery. Owner Harold Thiel's red flagship wine, 2005 La Brunante (\$70, rating 92) is already sold out.

Vintages did manage to lasso Twenty Twenty-Seven Cellars 2007 Riesling (#92353, \$25.15, 90), a stellar white from Kevin Panagapka's virtual winery. A graduate of Niagara College's winemaking program, he rents space from a local winery to save money. It's nice to see a little guy make it big with a lovely first effort.

Other Ontario wineries making a splash this year were Coyote's Run, Peninsula Ridge, Fielding, Flat Rock Cellars, Malivoire, Tawes, Creekside and Angels Gate. All produce stellar wines in the Beamsville area's Twenty Valley region. Le Clos Jordanne's Burgundian-styled chardonnays and pinot noirs are top-notch, with prices to match.

My value leaders from Vintages shelves reviewed below include another golfer wine, the Nick Faldo Chardonnay. Okay, guys, enough. As many of you know, Stormin' Greg Norman expanded from Australia and now makes wines in California, too. Wayne Gretzky, who makes wines at Gretzky Estates in Ontario, has stickhandled his way into the Napa Valley, with a No. 99 Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 (#0091256, \$34.95, 88). Nice, but way overpriced.

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