

It's showtime for the much-anticipated Hidden Bench Vineyards

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A striking circular wooden sign advertising hidden bench Vineyards was installed Tuesday, effectively broadcasting the arrival of Niagara's newest winery. After four years of diligent behind-the-scenes work, Harald Thiel's dream project isn't going to be hidden any longer.

An attentive Thiel watched workers dig the postholes as if willing the new sign into place, while trucks delivering gravel, water and a special shipment of Pinot Noir glasses for the tasting bar rolled into the driveway. Landscaping crews were massing in the wings ready to groom the grounds around the hospitality and retail building once the crew completed pouring a walkway.

"It is crunch-time," says Thiel, casting a dutiful glance around the beehive of activity putting the finishing touches for today's opening. "I don't think it's any different from the opening of any other new faculty."

But hidden bench Vineyards and Winery isn't just another faculty. It's not even just another winery to hang out its shingle here in wine country. Reasonably few wineries have managed to create as much anticipation prior to making their public debut. Certainly no other winery in Canada has ever decided to sell off its entire inventory of wine in bulk to ensure making the best possible first impression with consumers.

"It was a difficult decision," Thiel says, of the resolution not to release any of the wines produced at hidden bench from the 2004 vintage, prior to winemaker Jean Martin Bouchard's arrival. "But J.M. convinced me it was the right decision. You want to come out of the blocks with the wines that you want in the bottle."

Word has been spreading about Thiel's expansive project since he purchased the property on Locust Lane, down the street from the pre-existing EastDell Estates, in September 2003. Discussions became more heated in November 2004 when the Toronto businessman purchased the Rosomel Vineyard from former Grape King Roman Prydatkewycz and smartly retained Prydatkewycz as vineyard manager. The immaculately-maintained Beamsville site has been the source of some of the Niagara's finest Bordeaux-style white and red wines as well as Rieslings, especially those produced by Brian Schmidt at Vineland Estates Winery.

A third vineyard, the Felseck estate across the road from the winery, was recently added to the mix, bringing Thiel's total acreage to 101 acres. Those vines produce more grapes than the 5,000-case hidden bench needs, so he plans to continue to sell fruit to other wineries. Total production at hidden bench is expected to level off in the neighbourhood of 8,000 to 10,000 cases.

The winery's portfolio includes wines from the 2005 and 2006 vintage, a well-edited selection of Chardonnay, Riesling and a limited production Sauvignon Blanc/Semillon blend (only 120 cases produced in 2005) called Nuit Blanche for the whites and Pinot Noir and Bordeaux-inspired red blends – Terroir Cache and La Brunante – for the reds.

The wines are uniformly stunning – there isn't a duff bottle in the mix. Early reviews from the wine media have been raves: "a breathlessly good portfolio" writes David Lawrason in the current issue of Toronto Life. The newly-released Nuit Blanche and 2005 Estate Chardonnay received highly recommended ratings in the current issue of Vines.

The opening inventory includes the 2005 Estate Chardonnay, the 2005 Estate Riesling, the 2005 Nuit Blanche and two vintages of the Pinot Noir-based Locust Lane Rose (the 2005 and 2006 respectively). The wines aren't cheap, but wines of this quality never are. Prices range from \$18 for the roses to \$40 for the white blend. The latter is being sold with a two-bottle limit, as Thiel explains, to ensure as many people as possible get a chance to taste it.

Other wines, including the hotly-anticipated 2005 Pinot Noir and two 2006 Rieslings, will be released later this fall. hidden bench's top-of-the-line Chardonnay and red blend, La Brunante, are being kept back for release in 2008. Thiel seems unwilling to completely lose the mystique surrounding his winery. The best is yet to come.

The tasting room will be open weekends from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and weekdays by appointment. Wines are presented as a flight, served in specially-selected Schott Zwiesel crystal stemware, with a \$10 tasting fee for the day's selection. Visit www.hiddenbench.com or call 905-563-8700 for more information.

"We're getting pretty excited," explains Thiel who has been working towards this day for the past four years. "Saturday is going to be one of those benchmarks for us.

"Seeing the winery completed was a benchmark. Our first crush (grape harvest) was a benchmark ... Bottling our wine for the first time was a benchmark ... But opening day is likely the biggest benchmark we'll see. After all, the ultimate goal is to share your wines with people."

hidden bench Vineyards and Winery, 4152 Locust Lane, Beamsville, 905-563-8700, www.hiddenbench.com

Wine of the Week

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hidden bench Vineyards and Winery 2005 Nuit Blanche Rosomel Vineyard Beamsville bench, Niagara Peninsula \$40

This oak-enhanced white is the early favourite from hidden bench's attention-getting inaugural portfolio. The blend of Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon from the Rosomel Vineyard makes for a wonderfully exotic and hedonistic wine. There's a lovely grilled pineapple flavour, fleshy texture and a long, lingering finish that speaks to the obvious talent of winemaker J.M. Bouchard. 120 cases. (Winery only.)

(Rating is out of five stars.)

Christopher Waters is the managing editor of VINES, a national wine magazine. He was named Wine Journalist of the Year at the 2004 Ontario Wine Awards. Waters can be reached by e-mail at vin@vaxxine.com